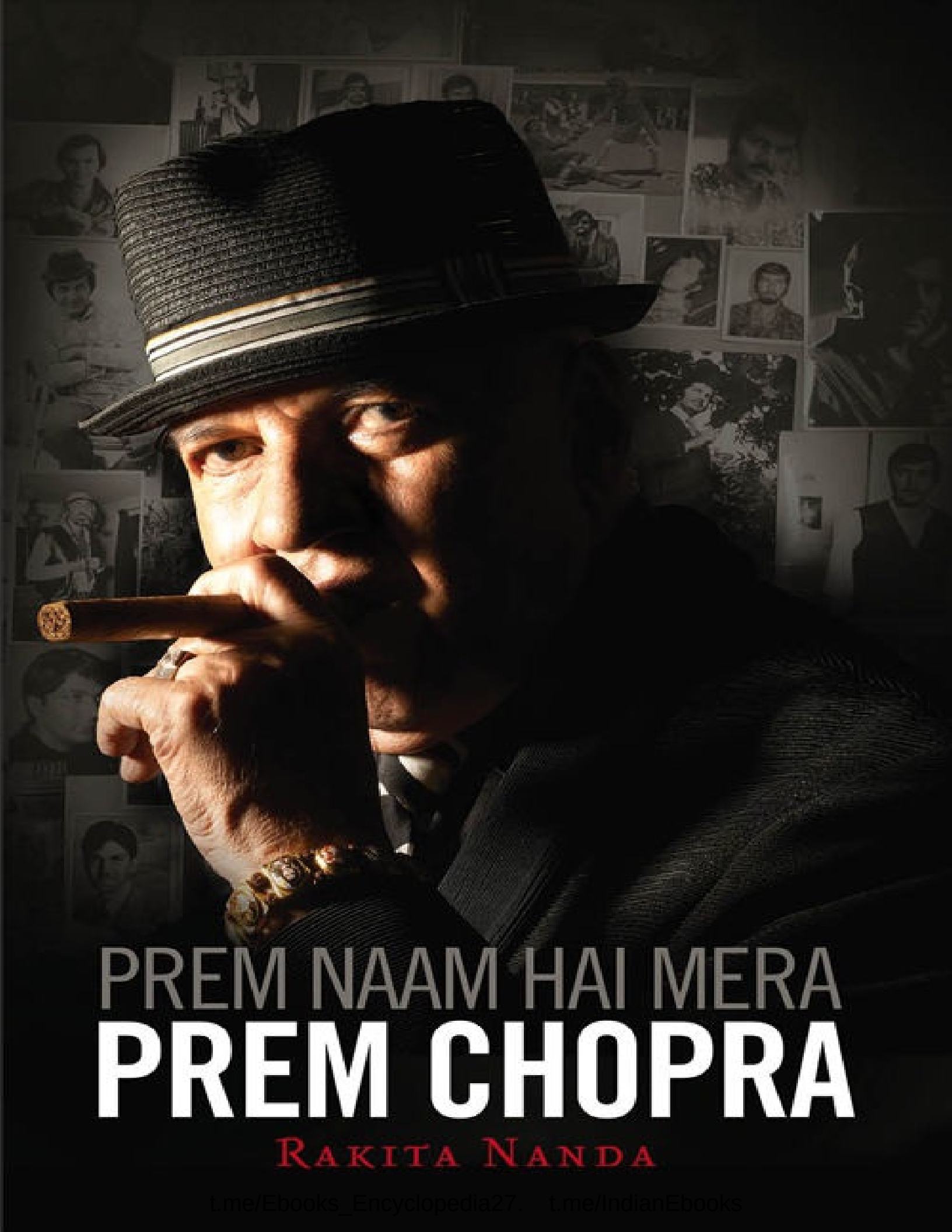

PREM NAAM HAI MERA
PREM CHOPRA

RAKITA NANDA

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VISIT…

Think Bollywood villain and one of the first names that comes to mind is that of Prem Chopra. One of the few actors to have been working in the industry for more than five decades, from the black-and-white era to the new millennium, and still going strong, he is a legend in his own right.

This fascinating memoir, penned by his daughter Rakita Nanda and told in Prem Chopra's words, reveals the story behind the man people loved to hate. Read about his memorable journey from his time as a young boy who used to wait outside the Clarks Hotel in Shimla to catch a glimpse of the film stars who stayed there, to being mobbed by fans at the same hotel many years later. Get to know about the man who was once reviled by the public for his lecherous on-screen avatar, but who was known within the film industry for his couplets, which the star Dharmendra christened 'Prem Awargi'. Above all, meet Prem Chopra the family man: a devoted husband and doting father to three daughters.

Replete with humorous anecdotes and previously untold stories, and including interviews about Chopra with stars such as Manoj Kumar, Dharmendra, Amitabh Bachchan, Sharman Joshi, Ranbir and Rishi Kapoor, *Prem Naam Hai Mera, Prem Chopra* is an intimate look at the life of one of the most enduring stars of the Indian film industry.

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Rakita Nanda

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To all cinema lovers, industry friends and colleagues who have loved the actor and man in my father

To my mother—his biggest support and the backbone of our lives

To my sisters, Punita and Prerana, who have been a part of the countless cherished memories of our childhood

To my dad's sister, Anju Dumra, the apple of his eye

To my daughter, Risha

And my guide, my husband Rahul, who motivated me to pen the story of my dad, believing it to be a story worth telling; an inspiration for many…

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The greatest of us are sinners and the worst of us are saints.

—W. Somerset Maugham

I have always believed in the five Ds, which are the reasons for my staying in the industry for so long: 'Dedication, Determination, Discipline, Devotion and Desire to be the best'.

—Prem Chopra

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Prologue

Why did I write the story in first person?

The idea of a book about my dad came from my husband when he said, 'Your dad has survived in the industry for five decades, where the average span is about a decade; not easy…'

I pondered over it and spoke to Dad, desiring to work on his biography. He was game. A series of interviews followed as we went through his life, year by year, film by film. Next were the press clippings, and the credit for this goes to my mother, who has methodically stored them over the years. Every press clip since 1969—the year they were married—till date is painstakingly catalogued. I did not have to look elsewhere for my research.

Meanwhile, I began watching his movies all over again—this time critically—and the thought crossed my mind that he was a good actor. That was strange, my realization.

My journey of rediscovering Dad had begun.

This book is an amalgamation of my personal interviews with him, plus all the press clippings and interviews with journalists for various publications such as *The Times of India, The Indian Express, Screen, Filmfare, Illustrated Weekly of India, Movie, Stardust, Star & Style, Cine Advance, Blitz, Cine Blitz, Mid- day, Movie Jagat,* etc.

As I wrote the first few drafts, I realized that the best way to put his story across would be as if he was narrating it in his own words.

—Rakita Nanda

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1973

A film is being shot in Pune. I reach the sets and ask for the dialogues. Raj Kapoor, the director, says, 'The heroine is a new girl. The moment she enters, you will hold her hand tightly and say, *Prem naam hai mera…Prem Chopra*!' I look at him blankly. He is firm, 'This is the dialogue.' I am surprised at the lines Raj-ji has given me; I am not happy.

Raj Kapoor had told me that he had a guest appearance for me in this film, *Bobby* (1973). I replied that as I was currently doing parallel roles, this could set a wrong precedent. He reiterated that this was the role he had in mind for me at the time, but promised to compensate with a full-fledged role later. But it seemed that even in the guest appearance, I had just this one dialogue in the film. It did not feel right.

I shared all this with Premnath, who was on the sets that day. He replied prophetically, 'Just believe me, this film will be a big hit. You will get publicity worth millions; your dialogue will be a super hit.'

Soon after the release of *Bobby*, I was in Dalhousie for the shooting of *Kala Sona* (1975). I was returning by train to Delhi (there are no flights to Dalhousie) when the train ticket (TT) inspector and the rest of the staff recognized me. The TT must have informed the railway authorities ahead that I was on the train because when we reached the station there was a huge gathering clamouring for me. They were reciting 'the line'. The TT requested me to come out and wave to the public. When I stepped out, the only thing they wanted of me was to say that one line. I played to the gallery, '*Prem naam hai mera, Prem Chopra*!' And the public loved it! They still do.

The train stopped at every station till we reached Delhi, and I repeated the performance at each stop. The next day the headline in a Delhi newspaper read that the train from Dalhousie to Delhi had been delayed by an hour because of Prem Chopra. I had never expected such a reaction.

I soon realized that I had to deliver 'the line' at every show in India or abroad thenceforth. The dialogue that I had been unhappy with had made me a brand for life. Overnight it became my trademark, synonymous with me.

In the film *Ajab Prem Ki Ghazab Kahani* (2009), Ranbir Kapoor's character is called Prem and he too uses my trademark line. The dialogue was even part of the trailers! I was both amused and happy. When I went to see the movie at a theatre, the entire audience turned to see my reaction when this scene was played. I was humbled.

Released in the same year, Ajay Devgn's character in *All the Best: Fun Begins* was called Prem Chopra; he too said 'the line'. I saw the film and messaged Ajay Devgan, 'You have used my name well.'

In *Golmaal 3* (2010), I played Ratna Pathak Shah's father who does not approve of his daughter's relationship with Mithun Chakraborty. I appeared in a flashback and, in true dramatic style, emoted my signature line.

Sudden interest was also visible in theatre in 2010, with a Marathi play, *Prem Naam Hai Mera, Prem Chopra,* and two years later in a Gujarati play, *Pappa Maara Prem Chopra*.

Recently, I saw *Once Upon a Time in Mumbaai Dobaara* (2013), and I was pleasantly

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surprised to see a character playing a fan of mine, who copies my costumes. Such sequences have served to keep my screen presence fresh and introduce me to the new generation.

Even today, army friends drinking in their mess quote theatrically, 'Don't try to be funny, mera naam hai Prem, Prem Chopra.'

Out of the hundred years that Indian cinema has celebrated, I have been around for almost sixty.

But where did it all start?

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1

The Early Years

Lahore, Krishna Gali No 5: The interior of a middle-class house

My father, Ranbirlal, sent for a dai-maa for his wife Rooprani, in labour for their third child. It was 23 September, pre-Independence; the couple had two boys, Kailash and Vishwa, and Rooprani fervently hoped for a girl this time.

Ranbirlal, a brilliant man, with a 'first-class first' in college, was an accounts officer in the accountant general's office. Rooprani, though unlettered, possessed basic intelligence and a lot of common sense. They were a close-knit middle-class family.

The dai-maa came out of the room. It was a son again. Ranbirlal jubilantly named him Prem. Rooprani, though, was disappointed; they would just have to try again till she had a girl. Two more sons followed, Ravindra and Brahm. They had five sons—a good number. But Rooprani continued to aspire for a daughter and was disappointed each time a son was born.

My grandfather, Basant Rai Chopra, doted on me; I was easily his favourite. He kept my photo beside him in a glass case and addressed me as Bhola.

I was ten when my father decided that it was time to move to safer territory. The winds of change suggested that he move quickly, lest we get caught in circumstances beyond out control.

CUT

Exterior, Lahore Railway Station

1947. We boarded a train to Ambala and our belongings followed in a truck. The move was made in the nick of time. A month after we left, the bloodshed and the slaughter began. We stayed with Bua, my father's sister, and her husband Mr Seth, for three to four weeks. At the time, work was being offered to refugees as per their talents and my father was soon allocated a job by the government in Simla.

CUT

Simla

1951. Biji (as we called my mother) was overcome with joy. She had given birth to a sixth child, this time a girl. My sister Anju was born in independent India.

Biji used to make gur ke chawal on our birthdays and holidays and I would take the maximum portion by fair or foul means, as that was my favourite dish. Biji was addicted to gutka and though often unwell, she refused to heed the doctor's advice, continuing to eat the betel nut when no one was looking. Her obsession used to annoy me tremendously.

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After the family moved to Simla, we children started going to the Sanatam Dharam School. I was a studious boy, applying myself diligently till I passed out of school. As I was not bold enough to take part in extracurricular activities, my ambition was to be an IAS or IFS officer. I was easily the best student among us five brothers and Paaji (my father), had his hopes pinned on me. Paaji had aspired to be a doctor, but his dreams remained unfulfilled due to the financial constraints of his father. He encouraged me to take admission in science, hoping that I would become a doctor.

I loved to watch films, especially 'stunt' films featuring the vibrant Nadia and John Cawas. Somewhere deep down, a passion to act was being kindled in me. I used to take part in school plays. It was early though, as yet, to think of what it would be like to become a professional actor.

My father was a strict disciplinarian with rules you dared not cross. Topping this list was smoking.

I was about thirteen when the forbidden began to look attractive. A friend's father smoked cigars, so he managed to purloin a couple and I smoked one for the first time. We swaggered towards my house near Baluganj in style, taking a puff and then blowing out the smoke. Of course, this brought on some coughing (both of us were first-timers), but we were too far gone in excitement for that to deter us. I still remember the fog and two men in the distance walking towards us. We continued in style with the swagger, puffed-up as we were. As the two men came closer, I realized that one of them was Paaji. I wished I could disappear into the ground. He had caught me smoking! I got one tight rap on the spot.

He thundered, 'Where did you get the cigar from?'

I pointed towards my friend. He also received a rap. That was it; I had smoked for the first time and been caught. Back home I got a good thrashing and a long lecture! Never again did I smoke, except professionally. No one really smoked in my family, except my brother Vishwa. He was also suspected of smoking and thrashed by Paaji, though he kept a sweet cigarette on hand to say, 'I was only chewing this one.'

In later years, my sister started chewing gutka on the sly. I have admonished her and thrown out umpteen packets, but I suspect she continues with it. Kids imbibe what they see their parents do; the grounding is laid in the early years.

We used to have bottle of brandy in the house. Since it was cold in Simla, our parents would give us a teaspoon of brandy with milk. Our father would have egg flip (milk with egg and brandy). In a few years, one of my brothers and I began to steal the brandy and replace the amount drunk with water so that the bottle looked the same. Soon, the others were having diluted brandy when it was administered to them with their milk. When Paaji came to know of our escapade, he forbore from losing his temper; he merely said, 'Just don't do it behind my back.'

We are all social drinkers—just like our father was—and keep to our limits. Just a peg or two and call it a day!

After matriculation, I joined the Bhargava Municipal College in the FSc section. However, my first language was Urdu. My peers in college were from better schools; more polished and smart than I was. I aspired to better myself and worked at it.

In college I mustered the courage to venture into new things, especially dramatics and debates. Principal Khanna was very encouraging. By now my main aim was to be popular in college and my foray into dramatics had revealed my acting abilities. A subconscious desire surfaced—I was no longer merely a bookish boy.

Soon I lost interest in pursuing medical studies. I loved theatre. My theatre friends who had opted for arts were finishing classes earlier than the rest of us, using the time for drama practice. I

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was stuck in the labs doing experiments. Within six months of joining FSc, I decided to tell my father that I was shifting to the arts.

Though stunned, Paaji bounced back to reason with me. He was sorely disappointed when he realized that he could not talk me out of this supposedly foolish endeavour.

With my mind made up, I joined the arts course with history, economics and political science as my subjects. I had switched thinking it would be much easier to get through. It certainly was, but I still needed to study for at least sixteen hours a day in the last two months. But even after the shift, my grades fell since I was more interested in dramatics.

Paaji summoned me once again. He argued, 'I have no business to pass on to you, nor are you going to inherit any money. You should think of the future and sit for the service exams.'

However, seeing me stubbornly holding my ground, Paaji gave in with a dictum, 'You can leave my house after doing your graduation—the minimum education one should have. If anything untoward happens, you should at least be able to get a job.'

This advice proved to be of great help to me in the future. I forced myself to concentrate and complete my graduation on schedule.

I always knew I was different from the other members of my family. Simla, well-known for dramatics, had a lot of amateur dramatic clubs (ADCs). I was fascinated by the performances. Gaiety Theatre, designed by the British architect Henry Irwin, was the most frequented at the time. There were others like Kali Bari Hall which staged shows too. I worked hard on my roles, consumed with a desire to make something of my life. The effort was visible; soon I began to be appreciated for my performances in both English and Hindi plays.

One of the plays, *Samra/Badla,* was about two characters in love with the same woman. While I played one of them, the other was enacted by Amrish Puri, a senior in college. *The Interview* was one of the English plays I acted in, and I even won an award for this role. My first award! Many more were to come, but I was ignorant of the future.

No one from my family had ever ventured anywhere near theatre; I was the first. They were all in government jobs.

During the climax of one of my college plays, I was shot dead. My family was in the audience and my heart broke as I heard my four-year-old sister Anju sobbing hysterically. We are almost fifteen years apart and I felt so helpless lying on the stage, unable to assure her that I was fine. Somehow the family managed to calm her down.

Professor Sood was my English professor. We would meet again years later, when the professor was ninety years old, and recall old times. He had seen me in our college plays and was impressed at the time.

A passion for cinema took firm root in me around this time. Regal, Rivoli and Ritz, all movie theatres, were frequented by me at every opportunity. I devoured movies of Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand and Raj Kapoor. Of the three, I was drawn most to Dilip Kumar's style of acting. I was fascinated by him and saw all his films. Though I was yet to understand whether a film was good or bad, his presence in a movie justified my interest in it. In later years, when people went for a film just because I was acting in it, life turned a full circle. I was on top of the world!

Any actor who came to Simla stayed at the Clarks Hotel. The presence of a celebrity was a matter of great excitement for the locals. A crowd would wait outside the hotel to catch a glimpse, even if it was M. Rajan or I.S. Johar inside.

I once heard that Pran saab and I.S. Johar were shooting near my college. My friends and I rushed off excitedly, hoping to get an opportunity to talk to them. When this did not happen, we were

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terribly upset.

Many years later, when I had become a popular actor and was staying at Clarks, the manager called up to tell me that a crowd had collected outside. It was a very emotional moment for me. Cloaked in memories of the past, I immediately went down. I signed as many autographs as I could and shook hands with all of them. I could see myself amongst them. I walked up to them, sat with them and had a long conversation. It gave me a lot of satisfaction.

Once I was a part of the crowd and now they were waiting for me. Life was truly beautiful!

★

Since I had made a considerable name for myself in the film industry, I was invited by former Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq to Karachi for a cultural meet along with Shatrughan Sinha and Javed Akhtar. However, I fell ill and couldn't make it. I always wanted to go back to Pakistan once. My father always felt that nothing would remain of the past; what is gone is gone. Yet, a friend who went to Lahore came back and said, 'I went to Krishna Gali and visited your house and told the people who lived there that you were born there. They were so excited.'

I believe that the house is now known as Prem Chopra's house.

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Bombay and my First Dishoom

In 1955, I was waiting for my graduation results, when I expressed a desire to try my luck at films in Bombay (now Mumbai). My ideas upset my parents. They felt cheated, betrayed. I ended up confused.

I took up a job in the National Savings Certificate in Simla before being transferred to Karnal, where I was a clerk. I managed the office there with a peon for six months. Subsequently, I moved to Delhi, where Paaji had already made plans for me to work with the accountant general of India. But accounts and figures were not my cup of tea. I worked there for a year, but was unhappy with my life.

I lived with my mamaji, Prakash, at Mori Gate in Delhi. Paaji made an arrangement whereby a portion of my salary went to my uncle for my living expenses. I joined a theatre group once again and got back to the routine of rehearsals. It was here that people encouraged me to try my luck in cinema.

I quietly left Delhi for Bombay one day. I was barely twenty, unsure and anxious about my future in that big city. I arrived in Bombay, wanting to believe that my acting abilities, which had been lauded in Simla and Delhi, would pave the way to instant employment. I soon realized that not only was it difficult to get work, but it was impossible even to enter a studio. My first dishoom!

But I had set foot on the road to fulfilling my dream, albeit with unsteady steps.

When I spent three to four months in Bombay in the 1950s, I slept on a single cot with three room-mates in Sadguru Lodging and Boarding House at Dadar near Hindmata Talkies. I paid a monthly rent of fifty rupees, which included my meals.

Meanwhile, my father had put in a word for me at the Seamen's Employment Office. In order to survive, I started working there. My role was to recruit people and place them on different ships. Though it was clerical work, it solved my immediate problem of survival.

I then moved to Sagar Vihar. Four of us shared a room now. Alan Luther, Mohan Singh and Surender Kukreja were my room-mates.

Every evening I went studio-hopping, much like the hundreds of aspirants all over the world, I waited patiently outside the gates of the studios for a look or a word from my favourite stars. And I returned home disappointed.

During one of my studio rounds, I met producer Kuldeep Saigal and Lekh Raj Bhakri, who was a director. They were impressed by my personality and offered me a small role in their film *Tangewali* (1955), starring Shammi Kapoor and Balraj Sahni. It was an inspector's role and they promised that it could serve as a screen test for the future. I agreed to do my first and only scene in the film, which required me to give a license to the tangewali. It was released in 1955 and I went to Delhi for the film screening. There I met Lekhraj Bhakri's cousin Manoj Goswami and we became good friends. Manoj often came to my flat and I turned up at his house with equal ease. Two years later, my friend was launched by Lekhraj Bakhri in *Fashion* (1957), under the screen name Manoj Kumar.

Eight months passed after *Tangewali* without any change in my fortunes. I felt dejected. My father wrote frantic letters asking me to return to Simla and I reluctantly caved in. I was back in Simla after a year and started looking for a job, but luckily I landed an interview with Lever

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brothers in Delhi, but faced rejection there too.

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The 1960s: Second Trip to Bombay

Six months in Delhi and my restlessness knew no bounds. I was unable to shake off the conviction that I would make it in films some day.

I left home for Bombay once again in 1960, with determination and anxiety struggling hand-in-hand. I remember feeling engulfed by darkness, and struggled to convince myself that a tiny light would appear, signalling the end of my travails.

My father had admonished me before I left, 'I cannot afford [to pay for] you there. Understand that I have a large family to support; I cannot and will not send you any money. It would be sensible if you take up a proper job before pursuing your dreams. Then, even if your acting career does not take off, you will be able to fend for yourself.'

Stepping out of Bombay's Victoria Terminus station, I knew that my first priority was finding a job. I undertook some odd jobs before I was fortunate enough to secure a steady job with *The Times of India (TOI)*.

I worked as an inspector/supervisor in the circulation department of *TOI* from 1961–67. I was assigned the areas of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa for checking sales and collating the requirements in the field. The job was fairly simple, as there was no competition for *TOI* publications in those days. In fact, the agents would be waiting for the supervisors to place their orders.

I had to be in the field for twenty days in a month. My salary was five hundred rupees plus travel allowances. It kept me comfortable. All this travelling helped me a lot. Seeing new places and meeting different people enhanced my knowledge, helping me understand life better. Travel is a great teacher, and practical experience is more useful than any number of books you may read. The job was interesting. I built up a healthy rapport with my boss who was more like a friend to me.

Since I was in Bombay for only half the month, I stayed at the Oliver Guest House in Colaba. Soon, I devised a scheme to reduce the time spent in touring my areas. I would ask the agents to meet me at the railway station itself. My meetings would be held there and I would assess and advise on the spot before jumping back on the train to my next destination. A tour that would normally take fifteen to twenty days was now being completed in twelve. I now had three extra days to pursue my dream as I went from one studio to the other.

In any case, I was doing the rounds of studios before and after work each day. My heart was in films and gradually my concentration on the job decreased. I kept mulling over how a certain actor had enacted a scene, and how I would do it in his place. I frequented two studios—the Mahalaxmi Famous Film Studio and Naaz Cinema, which had a lot of film offices. I was almost living there, visiting them during my lunch hour too, and circulating my photos. Soon, I was frequenting the studios even during working hours.

My boss J.C. Jain obligingly turned a deaf ear to all the complaints.

I had met Yash Chopra in Simla when he was not yet a director. I knew him to be B.R. Chopra's brother. I met him once again in Bombay at Kardar Studios, where he introduced me to Mahendranath Malhotra, whose wife was a good friend of my mother. (Later, I went on to become good friends with Mahendranath's son Navkesh*.) Mahendranath was a cinematographer and took me

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to meet a few people. Yash Chopra also introduced me to his brother, B.R. Chopra, but nothing concrete came of it.

However, this time, I was made of stronger mettle. I had realized that it was not going to be as easy as I had imagined. I had naively believed that stage experience and a fair complexion would swamp me with film offers. And I had been proved wrong. In those days, it was very difficult for a newcomer to make a mark with stalwarts firmly reigning over the show.

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*Naresh Malhotra today owns Prime Focus.

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Chaudhary Karnail Singh and Punjabi Films

Interestingly, I was spotted and offered a job in the course of a journey on a train. This was to be the next milestone in my life. I was on one of my trips for *TOI* when a gentleman kept looking at me on the train. Finally he asked, 'Are you interested in acting in a film?'

I looked at him, dumbfounded, before I could manage a 'Yes, I am.' The man was Krishen Kumar's production controller. I accompanied him to Ranjit Studios as he briefed me on the lead role for a Punjabi film. I was nervous; although I was thankful to get a role, a part of me was still very keen on making it in Hindi films.

My instinct took over; I decided that it was better to start acting, irrespective of the language, and improve my portfolio. That's how I did my first full-fledged role in the Punjabi film, *Chaudhary Karnail Singh,* which was released in 1960. After five years of my so-called screen test in *Tangewali,* I faced the camera again. I was asked to sign a contract and offered two thousand rupees for the film, an astronomical sum in the sixties. I was stunned and speechless. Fortunately, the happiness on my face signalled my acceptance. The payment for my first film as a hero came in instalments—I was paid five hundred rupees a year and the film was three years in the making.

Finally I could see light—*Chaudhary Karnail Singh* was ready to roll. My family, though, refused to be delirious about the offer. They were convinced that acting was a risky profession.

Dr. Vidya (1962) followed next—my daily rounds of the studios had started bringing in dividends. It starred Manoj Kumar and Vyjayantimala with Mohan Saigal as the producer and Rajendra Bhatia as the director. Once again, it was only a small role as I played a college student, and was part of a qawwali song. I did films like *Mud Mud Ke Na Dekh* (1960) around this time; nothing of consequence.

Meanwhile my mother was critically ill. She was diagnosed with mouth cancer. I was in Bombay when her end came and rushed back, devastated. My sister, Anju, was only nine years old, the baby of the family. It was left to my father and the five of us to look after her. Till date, she is treated as the firstborn of all the brothers. People say that whenever I speak of her, I have a special twinkle in my eyes. One of my brothers' wives remarked jocularly, 'My husband told me on our suhaag raat that Anju was like his daughter and I would have to be like a mother to her.' Eventually Anju ended up with six fathers and five mothers!

I always regretted that my mother could not see me on the big screen. However, she was quite excited when she saw me shooting in Kashmir for *Main Shadi Karne Chala* (1962). Anju, who was about six then, was thrilled about the shoot and accompanied me once or twice to the houseboat where the unit was staying.

Back in Bombay, *Chaudhary Karnail Singh* became a hit and I was approached to do more Punjabi films.

Punjabi movies, however, had small budgets and were riddled with chronic financial problems. In fact, most movies were not even completed. My remuneration from these movies was simply not enough to warrant giving up my job with *TOI.*

I was reluctant to do too much Punjabi cinema as I continued to nurture my dream to make it

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big in Hindi films. Yet my financial situation demanded me to be practical. It boiled down to simple economics. I could not afford to be choosy. I kept up my rounds to the studios while continuing with my job, hoping and praying every day for my luck to turn. It was around this time that I acted in *Sapni* (1963) and *Dharti Punjab Di* (1963).

When I got a chance to play the lead in *Sapni* opposite Nishi (who later married producer–director Raj Kumar Kohli), I grabbed the offer before discovering that I played a sapera and snakes would figure in a lot of scenes. I became jittery—I am petrified of snakes. But there was no backing out now; I couldn't afford to!

For the first two or three days they shot without snakes. I had concealed my revulsion of snakes for fear of losing this role of a snake charmer. I had to muster the courage to go through with it.

They shot quite a few scenes before I had to open a box from which the snake would raise its hood. I was then supposed to hold the snake in my hand and deliver my dialogue. A shiver ran down my spine. Each time I reached for the box my hand would withdraw involuntarily. I was cold all over, shivering with fear.

The director, Baldev Jingham, called 'action'. As I approached, my fear reached a feverish pitch, and when the snake popped out, I ran away in fright. This happened twice or thrice.

Sweating profusely, with clammy hands, I finally managed to touch the snake in the fourth take. That was the last straw—I ran out of the studio screaming with fear, 'I don't want to do the film.' That was when the producer realized what was wrong. But I could not be replaced; they had already shot a lot of scenes. So they compromised with an artificial snake. That saved the day!

Finally I got through my shot and even the director was pleased. Today I can face a snake but hold one? No way. Well, how many of us can do that anyway? I am unable to see snakes even on television. I wonder why I have such a deep-rooted fear—perhaps something from a previous life!

It was around this time that I met Mehboob Khan. He liked me and said, 'I will be making a film after *Son of India* [1962], and I'd like to give you a very important role in it. But it'll take some time.'

I was absolutely thrilled. Imagine, a filmmaker of Mehboob Khan's stature offering me a role! But bad luck seemed to follow me like a shadow. Mehboob saab took seriously ill and the project was shelved. Once again, I was without a film.

Fortunately I hadn't quit my job in *TOI* or else I would have been in dire straits. Months passed; Mehboob saab hadn't recovered yet. I was dejected and restless. Dishooooom!

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Bujh Jaye Shama Toh Jal Sakti Hai
Kashti Hade Toofan Se Guzar Sakti Hai
Mayus Na Ho, Iraade Na Badal
Taqdeer Kisi Waqt Bhi Badal Sakti Hai

(An extinguished flame can be lit again
A boat can cross in spite of a storm
Don't be disheartened, do not change your course
Destiny can change any moment)

—Prem Chopra

I was becoming creative in my reasons for absenting myself from work. Twice I excused myself on the pretext of going to Chandigarh to get married. When I came back and my collegues congratulated me, I looked forlorn and told them that the wedding had been called off as the prospective in-laws were very different from us. Another time I pretended to be unwell. I was becoming an expert at cutting down my fifteen- to twenty-day tours to a mere eight days by having all my meetings at railway stations. (On a different note, I must admit that thanks to this job, I saw so much of India.) I travelled through Puri, Behrampur, Bhubhaneshwar, Calcutta, Jasuguda and Sasaram, among other places. If no accommodation was available, I would sleep in the first-class restroom at the station in those long chairs on which you could put your feet up.

My second break came in 1961. Rajendranath and I used to frequent Gaylord restaurant, where I met N.N. Sippy. He asked me to meet him for a role in the film he was making with director Raj Khosla. It was a suspense thriller and they needed a new face for an important character. When I was told I had to play the villain, after having played a hero, I was at a crossroads. Would it mean the end of my career as a hero if I accepted this offer? Once again, my economic straits won the day; I needed a film badly, so I agreed.

Manoj Kumar was the hero of the film. We had been in touch ever since our *Tangewali* days. I had also done *Dr. Vidya* with him. The role consisted of only two to three scenes. *Woh Kaun Thi* was released in 1964 and went on to be a super duper hit, and my part was highly appreciated.

I was finally noticed.

Mehboob Khan was at the premiere of *Woh Kaun Thi*. I had been visiting his office after *Son of India* had been released and he continued to ask me to keep faith. The day after the premiere, Mehboob Khan was informed that I was shooting at Mehboob Studios for a Punjabi film, *Pardesan* (1959), and he came to meet me on the set.

Mehboob saab said, 'I was at the premiere of *Woh Kaun Thi* last night.'

I was surprised to discover that he was angry. 'I asked you to hold on, didn't I? I was sure you

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would excel in a hero's role. You have no patience. Now you are going to be labelled a villain for life, because this movie is going to be a hit! There's a huge vacuum for a villain and you're going to fill it.'

I can never forget that day. No one had ever displayed such interest, such concern regarding my career. I was moved. Finally he said, 'Anyway, good luck to you.'

Mehboob saab had just told me I would never be a hero! Dishoom!

In retrospect, I could not have waited for Mehboob saab, much as he wished to give me a break as a hero in Hindi films. He had wanted me to be patient, but he was very ill. To my credit, I did wait, knowing that a break from him meant sure stardom. But when people began to offer good character roles and Mehboob saab's health did not get any better, I knew I had to move on. I worked in movies like *Shaheed* (1965), *Teesri Manzil* (1966) and *Woh Kaun Thi*, and I also played the lead in a movie named *Kunwari* (1966), apart from others. Of all these movies, *Woh Kaun Thi* was released first.

Mehboob Khan's prophesy came true. *Woh Kaun Thi* was a runaway success, while the movies in which I played the lead did not do well. There was a void of good-looking villains except for Pran, and I stepped in to fill this space, with a steady stream of offers for negative roles.

At this point, I made a conscious decision to bring depth and variety to my portrayals of villainous characters by adding shades and dimensions each time. I was wary of being typecast.

However, still nursing the desire to become a hero, I carried the reels of *Chaudhary Karnail Singh* to Tolaram Jalan at Filmistan Studio. With him was Bakshi, his co-writer, advisor and right-hand man.

Bakshi called me aside and asked me three things:

'You want to be a popular actor?'

'You want to make money?'

'You want to have a house and car?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, yes, yes!'

It was then that Bakshi said, 'Then forget about a hero's role; do the villain's role.'

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I remained in touch with Manoj Kumar after *Woh Kaun Thi*. He called me one day and said, 'I am starting a new film with Keval P. Kashyap and we are looking for someone to play an important role, are you interested?' I was very interested, and immediately met with both of them.

Kewal P. Kashyap had planned a small-budget film, *Shaheed*, to be shot extensively in Ludhiana. It was an answer to my prayers, as they offered me the part of Sukhdev, fructifying my desire to play positive roles. *Shaheed* turned out to be a pleasant, rewarding experience. It was shot in real locations—in the Ludhiana jail, in the cells where the martyrs were detained and on the death row where they were kept in isolation. The film was made on a shoestring budget; they even used tennis floodlights for the night shoots.

I was applauded several times in the course of shooting for *Shaheed*. I have always tried to put my heart and soul into any character that I have played. On many occasions I have chosen to stay away from parties or other social events to concentrate on the role at hand. *Shaheed* was released in 1965 and declared a hit. It became a cult picture and I was noticed again.

I signed a film called *Sagaai* (1966) with S.D. Narang. It was an above-average film, and I was a villain once again. The movie had Biswajeet and Rajshree playing the lead roles. S.D. Narang decided to take me under his wing and signed a three-movie contract, promising to reintroduce me as Prem Kumar, a hero. He even had a press conference to announce his decision. Somehow those films were never made.

Around 1965, I did *Nishan* for Wadia Pictures—Sanjeev Kumar was introduced in this film and I was the villain. It did very well at the box office. I was still working for *TOI* and it was becoming increasingly difficult to manage both my careers judiciously.

I also did a cameo in *Poonam Ki Raat* (1965) for Kishore Sahu with Manoj Kumar in the lead. I was, by now, in a position to choose films and would not have agreed to a miniscule role, but for the fact that you never refused Kishore Sahu.

Sikandar E Azam, another film released in 1965, was shot in Jaipur. The movie had the very handsome, Greek God-like Prithviraj Kapoor. I had seen his stage shows in Simla and was impressed by his personality.

Premnath and I played his sons. There was a scene with a battalion of elephants that required a long shot with both of us in it. The shot was interminably lengthy and by the time the camera finished panning, something would invariably go wrong, requiring another take. No break was allowed and both of us had to remain seated on our elephants. We manged a quick bite every time the camera was not on us. Premnath and I became good friends. It was much later, almost by providence, that I married Premnath's sister, Uma.

I played the role of Abhimanyu and my death scene was applauded. It was a positive role. Sikandar was played by Dara Singh.

Sikandar E Azam was N.C. Films' biggest hit. They were also the makers of *Mud Mud Ke Na Dekh*, in which I had played the villain with Bharat Bhushan as the hero. The movie was released in 1960, the same year as *Gharana*. *Kamal Singh*

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After *Woh Kaun Thi*, Raj Khosla offered me *Mera Saaya,* which was released in 1966. I knew Prem-ji, the producer, on a personal level. Yet, I can say with conviction that it is sheer ability which takes you forward, not personal relations.

Kunwari saw me playing the hero; again, it did not do well. The movie was shot in Khandwa. The director was S.N. Tripathi and I was cast opposite Indrani Mukherjee.

My brother, Kailash, came to Mumbai in the seventies and made a film, *Lagan* (1971). He left a lucrative job in Hindustan Steel in Ranchi, wanting to be a part of the world of films. I was friendly with M.V. Ramanna and he agreed to partner the production as well as direct the film. I was paired opposite Nutan and had a very good role. Balraj Sahni's son, Ajay Sahni, was the hero; he later made a name for himself as Parikshit Sahni.

Kailash also produced *Nafrat* (1973), directed by Shyam Ralhan and *Jab Andhera Hota Hai* (1974), directed by Deepak Bahry. I had a central role in both the films. Later, he also made *Shakka* (1981) and *Shukriyaa* (1988). All these films did average business at the box office.

When Paaji saw *Nafrat* at a night show, he came back home and woke me up to tell me I was terrific, adding, 'You are such a versatile actor…I never knew it.'

A clear pattern was emerging. My films as a hero never seemed to do well, but most of my films with me as villain were successes. I was becoming typecast as a bankable villain.

Dishoom dishoom!

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The Usha Sadan Days

1965

I was living in block B of Usha Sadan those days, and as I stepped out for work each morning, I would notice another guy coming out of block C, who looked about the same age as I. Both of us would pretend to be busy and move on. But when we also started catching sight of each other waiting outside producers' cabins in the studios, we introduced ourselves.

'Hi, I am Prem.'

'Hi…Ravi,' he replied. We shook hands.

Observing that both of us drove our cars, I decided to talk to him. 'We need to stop pretending we are busy. We go to the same places and have the same agenda. Let's do a car pool. The day I take my car, I will also pay for your lunch and tea, and the next day will be your turn to do the same.' It was a reasonable proposal and Ravi instantly agreed.

We arranged to meet at a certain point and start the day together. We were crossing Chowpatty one day when two girls asked for a lift. One was attractive, while the other wasn't as much. Ravi asked me to stop the car and when I saw the objects of his interest, I braked instantly. My Herald had two doors. Ravi got out of the car to help the girls in and then sat next to the more attractive one in the back seat, while the average girl sat next to me. I started talking in 'made-up' Tamil, making fun of Ravi. The girls turned to Ravi and asked, 'What is he saying?' Ravi replied cheekily, 'He is saying he likes the girl sitting in front very much.' I rolled my eyes.

We took them to a theatre in Mahalaxmi to see the film *Neela Akash* (1965). The girls told us that they were Muslims and as they were keeping their rozas during the holy month of Ramzan, they would break their fast with us in the evening. During the interval I took Ravi aside and told him, 'Look, it is my turn to take care of the day's expenses, but I simply do not have enough money for a feast for these girls. Let us scoot.' Ravi agreed, his pockets were empty too, and we slipped out of the theatre. We just left the girls there.

Post office hours, our favoured hangout was Gaylord restaurant at Churchgate, a popular hub of the stars in those times. Ravi, better known as Jeetendra, made it big in Hindi films, and our friendship endured for decades to come.

Once I was shooting with Rajendranath, and after we packed up for the day, we decided to go to his flat in Anita building. The film, *Jab Pyar Kisi Se Hota Hai* (1961), where he played Popatlal and received a lot of adulation for his performance, had just released. He had a small sports car, and he kept putting his head out the window in jest, generally enjoying himself. Two men passing by on a scooter yelled out to him '*Kachcha kahaan hai*?' referring to his character Popatlal in the film. He was annoyed. 'People don't know how to behave with stars.' I was in the passenger seat and tried to calm him down. 'It's okay, just ignore them.' But Rajendranath chose to step out of the car in a burst of bravado. Meanwhile, the men also got off the scooter; they were six-footers and suddenly looked very alarming. Rajendranath started telling them off loudly before taking in their frames. Then he

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began to back down, saying mildly, 'This is not the way to behave.' But the men seemed to be gearing up for a fight. I got off the car and started in English, 'Let's take it easy,' trying to appease the situation. The men, angrier now, turned around and said to Rajendranath, '*Acchaa, angrez hai tera yaar*', mocking my use of English. I made a quick retreat into the car. A crowd had collected by then and the situation came under control thanks to their intervention. We were on our way again.

Rajendranath started mumbling, 'People don't know how to behave. And you, you just came out for two seconds!' he said, turning to me.

Suddenly he continued in the same tone, '*Bach gaye, varna pitaai hoti* (We were saved, else we would have been beaten up).'

A few moments later, we burst out laughing.

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1967 saw me starring alongside the Kapoor brothers, Shashi in *Aamne Samne* and Shammi in *Latt Saheb*.

Aamne Saamne was shot in Kashmir and also starred Sharmila Tagore. It was on these sets that I became very friendly with Shashi Kapoor. He was always up to mischief. We were shooting in Pahalgam and I was not yet popular. Fans milled around for autographs from Shashi and Sharmila; and even though unsure of my identity, they wanted an autograph from me. Shashi would intervene and snatch the book from my prospective fans to ask them who I was. I still remember one fan saying 'Sunil Dutt' and yet another mumbling 'Mehmood'. Shashi would say 'No' and drive the fan away. Finally, Shashi was in the midst of a shot when a fan came to me for an autograph. I quickly snatched the book and signed in bold letters 'PREM CHOPRA'. We laugh about this even today.

Ek Shriman Ek Shrimati (1969), produced by Boney Kapoor's father Surinder Kapoor and directed by Bhappi Sonie, was another film I did with Shashi. The story had Shashi wooing Babita, whereas she wanted to marry me. I fitted the mould of a good-looking second lead, convincing the audience that the heroine could be in love with the villain and not the hero.

During the film, I noticed that Shashi Kapoor was very organized and disciplined. He was among the first in the film industry to go on a diet. His wife would pack boiled food in his dabba and ensure that he would not overeat. He introduced the four to five shifts a day routine with an off on Sundays. And he managed all that due to sheer discipline.

The director of *Aamne Saamne* repeated Shashi and me in *Vachan* (1974). It had the song 'London se aaya hai albela', which was picturized on both of us. It was a comical song and became quite popular, but the film took a long time in the making.

I remember one time when Shashi pulled my leg; he got up to make a speech and said, 'I cannot speak because a "dada-samaan buzurg" is also present,' alluding to me as an elderly grandfather-like figure.

It was my turn next. I went on stage and said, 'I am at a loss for words with such senior people around, who were on the scene when I was still in, I won't say my birthday suit, but in shorts.' Both of us share a tremendous rapport. The best sense of humour is the ability to laugh at oneself.

While I was shooting for *Latt Saheb*, in Kulu Manali, I was still working with *TOI*. People had started noticing my absences from work by now and I knew it would be a matter of time before I was in trouble. Though we had finished shooting, we could not leave due to some problems with the transport. I had to report back at *TOI* and could not afford to wait, so I took a bus to Delhi from where I could catch a flight to Bombay. I met some people on the bus who recognized me as a famous star and were surprised at my mode of travel. But then, I had no choice.

We also shot in Mahabaleshwar for *Latt Saheb*. It was a very difficult period for Shammi Kapoor, who had just lost his wife Geeta Bali. My room was next to his and I would often hear sounds of banging and breaking glass in the middle of the night. I was concerned, then someone from production told me that Shammi Kapoor was drinking heavily to assuage his grief. I witnessed a lot of his tantrums those days, but then it was a traumatic time for him.

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Soon Shammi and I were working in *Pagla Kahin Ka* (1970), directed by Shakti Samanta and co-starring Asha Parekh and Helen. All four of us had starred in the huge hit, *Teesri Manzil*. There is a dance sequence in the beginning of *Pagla Kahin Ka*, where I play a drummer; I had to practise a lot to drum convincingly. I also had to dance, which I did with great rhythm. Shakti Samanta said, 'You were good.' And Shammi remarked, '*Dance aata hai tujhe!'* (You can dance!) They were all very surprised.

Shammi was such a lively man. I worked with him in so many films. It was not just him; most of us in the industry didn't take our lives seriously enough. Assuming our bodies and our youth to be eternal, we would jump from great heights, break our bones and still land up on the sets for the next shift. Shammi's body had taken so much punishment; no doubt his joints hurt a lot later. It's not easy being an actor. Being a star? Perhaps!

I met Shammi Kapoor with his wife Neelaji for dinner at a suburban hotel sometime before he passed away. She was in splits hearing our stories of bygone days. It was a wonderful evening steeped in nostalgia.

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9

Upkar

It was during the filming of *Shaheed* that I struck up a lasting friendship with Manoj Kumar. Out of the fifteen films we acted in together, nine were hits. Soon after its completion, he approached me to play a role in his film *Upkar* (1967). The movie was about two brothers. Manoj Kumar was to play the elder brother while I was to be the younger. However, I was not the first choice. The original candidate was a young actor named Rajesh Khanna, whose name was suggested to Manoj Kumar by the United Producers Council. He was signed on and his costumes were stitched. Around the same time, he was selected by a panel of producers in a Filmfare contest and had to choose between *Upkar* and Filmfare. He chose the latter. I was the second choice; thus, I got *Upkar*. The role seemed interesting; it had shades of grey. I was paid 15,000 rupees for it.

We worked for seventy-two hours at a stretch while shooting *Upkar's* last scene. Manoj Kumar worked hard; it was his film. Since the scene required shots of the rising sun in the background, we had to eat and sleep on the spot. A good camaraderie developed between Manoj and me and it only strengthened with every film we did together. I was a permanent fixture in his films; and once again I must add that it was not just because of our friendship but because of my acting abilities.

When I was about to start shooting for *Upkar,* my senior at *TOI*, J.C. Jain, called me to his cabin and said that there were complaints that I was absconding from work. I convinced him to let me stay on as I believed that only acting in films would not sustain me. I was let off with a warning to figure out whether I wanted to continue in *TOI* or not within the next six months. However, two or three months down the line, I realized I could not cope with both and gave up *TOI*, after working with them for five to six years.

Recently I met some people at a party. One of them, now in *TOI,* said to me, 'I sit at your desk and it has achieved iconic status because of you.'

Soon after *Upkar*, Manoj and I did *Yaadgaar* (1970) together. We were shooting in Udaipur and had stopped for tea when people surrounded Manoj Kumar. He pointed to me and asked them, 'Do you know who he is?' The fans replied, 'He played your older brother in *Upkar.'*

Manoj Kumar joked later, 'I kept screaming for three hours, "*Puran, mere chotey bhai*" (Puran, my younger brother) and yet they did not get it.'

Upkar became a super hit and 'Prem Chopra' became a name to reckon with. The golden moment was when a film magazine put me on the cover with a headline that read 'The villain who impresses…'

I had finally arrived!

I was delighted, and so was my family. Offers started pouring in. I was beginning to ascend the ladder of popularity.

Pran had moved on to much appreciated character roles with *Upkar* and *Shaheed*. The slot for a villain demanded that the actor look and behave like a villain, and yet be good-looking enough for the heroine to fall in love with him. I fitted the criteria perfectly; my luck had finally turned!

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Films with Manoj Kumar
Dr. Vidya (1961), *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964), *Shaheed* (1965), *Poonam Ki Raat* (1965), *Upkar* (1967), *Purab Aur Pachhim* (1970), *Yaadgar* (1970), *BeImaan* (1972), *Sanyasi* (1975), *Kranti* (1981), *Kalyug Aur Ramayan* (1987), *Clerk* (1989), *Santosh* (1989), *Jai Hind* (1999)

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Manoj Kumar: In Conversation

During the filming of *Yaadgaar,* I asked some fans if they recognized the man next to me. They looked at Prem and said 'Ashok Kumar'.

Prem was fair-complexioned and a great hit with girls, who would tell me that they wanted to marry him. I would reply that it was not about their wishes; he also had to wish to be married. Later, he married Uma, and she was a good influence on him. I found him to be a family man with a modern outlook.

During our struggling days, I would meet him quite often at Ranjit Studios and he would always give [the rest of] us a complex because of those fat English books he carried around with him to read.

He had a good habit of writing out his dialogues in Urdu. What you write, you remember. He would come prepared to the sets. He has always been a friendly man and exemplary in his behaviour to all—be it a marriage or a funeral, he is always there. Most people just don't bother.

Once I heard that he took on a celebrated producer–director on my behalf. The person in question had made an unsavoury remark about me and I believe Prem defended me aggressively. He has a strong sense of loyalty, but he will only pursue the right path.

We did *Upkar* and after that there was no looking back for Prem. He was flooded with offers from everyone.

Far from using stars for my own ends, I ensured that my films and roles, even if they did not enhance, at least kept their reputations intact. Long ago, Shashi [Kapoor] and I used to talk about wanting to make our own films and had promised each other that when one of us made a film, we would cast the other in it. Accordingly, he agreed to the role finally played by Prem in *Upkar*. But my conscience wouldn't permit me; I felt it was not appropriate to his image. So I signed Rajesh Khanna for the role; mind you, he was [then] yet to become *the* Rajesh Khanna. He heard the story and said, 'It's going to be a superhit.' Six days later he came to my place, and finding me away, he left a very beautiful letter explaining why he couldn't do the role. A group of ten big producers wouldn't allow him to work in *Upkar*. It was then that I decided to cast Prem Chopra because I thought the role would definitely help him. It did, and how!

We continued our relationship through several films after *Upkar*. During *Kalyug Aur Ramayan* (1987) he had to dance in a girl's costume for a scene. Manmohan Desai, who was on the sets, wished to take the credit for Prem's exceptional performance. But I stood my ground, 'No, the merit is Prem's, he is extremely dedicated.'

We had two shooting schedules for *Yaadgaar*. One was before he was married, when we would hang around in each other's rooms and go about together. The second schedule was post-marriage. I took one look at him, sitting quietly and reading a newspaper, and told him that he was now in the 'happily married' category. He brought along Uma for the London schedule of *Purab Aur Pachhim*. Being newly married, he would take his wife to restaurants after pack-up everyday.

His father was a fine man. But Prem felt that he had been let down by him with regard to some property matters in Delhi. Prem's view was that if only his father and brother had talked with him, the matter could have been sorted amicably. Their method of operation pained him immensely, and though he felt cheated he chose to keep the matter behind closed doors. That is Prem Chopra; he just lets

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things be. The betrayal always remained his private pain.

His other brother Kailash moved to Bombay to try his luck in films. He became a producer and made some films with Prem.

My personal belief is that no one tapped Prem's talent to the fullest. His background was theatre and he could recite Shakespeare impromptu.

Another wonderful facet of this man is [his] Prem Awargi; he composes great poetry.

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10

Waiting for the Cue

I'd had typhoid as a child, which affected my hearing. Though I was not deaf, I definitely had to strain in order to hear clearly. I managed to get through my stage performances and the *TOI* stint without anyone realizing my problem. However, I was always under the stress of being discovered as it can be perceived as a serious handicap. I took one day at a time, managing as best as I could.

However, there were some hiccups. Manoj Kumar recently recalled an incident,

> When we were shooting for *Shaheed*, I didn't realize that he could not hear too well. I remember a scene where he had to start his dialogue right after I finished speaking. I did the take five times but Prem just failed to get the cue right. Finally I realized that he had a hearing problem. So we decided that I would raise my hand and put it down at the end of my dialogue to serve as a cue for him to start. However, in the next take, I performed the gesture which was to be the cue at an earlier point; Prem started off, presuming it to be his cue. We had to call 'Cut' once again; I asked an assistant to give him a nudge after I had delivered my dialogues and we finally completed the scene. Later on, he got his hearing problem treated.

I was determined to be an actor; this problem was not going to get in my way!

My daughter Rakita told me some days back that in some press clippings during the 1980s, there was an article about how a popular actor pretended to lip-sync to have fun at my expense in front of his friends, to scare me into believing that I was once again unable to hear properly.

She asked me, 'How did you feel when people made fun of you?'

'Did they?' As I replied to her, I realized the triviality of the incident; I had gone far ahead, I needed to let it go too. 'I was always clear about my goals, I refused to allow myself to be bogged down by this.'

A physical problem was never going to be the dishoom in my life. No, never!

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Marriage

It was while working on *Jhuk Gaya Aasman* (1968) that Lekh Tandon, the director of the film, suggested an alliance for me with Krishna Kapoor's sister Uma. Rajendra Kumar, another close friend, also asked me to give it a serious thought. Rajendranath, Uma's other brother, also in films, wanted the match as well. I met my future wife for the first time in Rajendranath's house in Anita building. We spoke for a while and though I was sure that this was the girl I wished to marry, I needed time.

Paaji spoke to me. 'All your brothers are married; it is time you start your own family.' My eldest brother Kailash and my sister Anju met Uma and liked her; they strongly pressed her case to me.

There were other girls in my life at that time and I took a year to decide. I've always been honest about the women in my life. I have beautiful memories, and in two or three instances, the separation led to immense loneliness and frustration. I do not wish to name them as they're happily married now and I have no intention of placing them in an embarrassing position.

I was shooting in Simla with Rajendra Kumar for *Anjaana* (1969) around that time. Kumar, friendly with both sides, initiated a manto-man talk to ask me how I felt. I said I was positive. Kumar immediately called everyone and said, 'Prem has said "yes".' Uma and I were married the following year on 27 March 1969.

I invited a friend for the wedding and gave him the date. The friend replied, 'Oh no! I have to go for Rajendranath's sister's wedding that very day.' He was so happy when I told him that I was the groom for the same wedding!

Jeetendra accompanied me to the wedding venue. I was getting last-minute jitters and he helped me make light of it so that hanstey-hanstey we reached the venue.

I wanted a simple wedding and had warned the pandit to make it a quick five-to-seven minute affair. The simple wedding turned out to be a grand one. The entire industry was present, and the reception committee included Raj Kapoor and Premnath, who were personally receiving the guests.

Uma had lost her father when she was fifteen. Rajendranath, who hosted the party, was completely exhausted by the end. As he was driving home after the wedding, he had an accident—his car ended up under a truck. By God's grace and his good karma, he escaped without a scratch. It was impossible to believe that anyone could have survived the accident, given the condition of the car; truly, a second life for him. When he heard about the accident, Manoj Kumar quipped, 'I think it suddenly hit him that he had handed over his sister to the villain.'

Uma became my inspiration. She was my moral support and proved to be a very efficient housewife. I never had to worry about any domestic problems. She did it all—from maintaining accounts to running the house. She proved to be my lucky mascot. At times she even helped me with my make-up.

Soon after my marriage in 1969, my position was further consolidated in the industry. Raj Khosla's *Do Raaste* (1969) was a golden jubilee hit. I also signed my first film under a South Indian banner, *Waris* (1969), directed by M.V. Raghavan.

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Suddenly there was no looking back.

More offers poured in. And my hands were so full that I often forgot which character belonged to which film. I decided to maintain a file for every film that I signed. It helped to retain continuity for the different characters I played.

Uma took over admirably. She single-handedly managed the accounts, taxes, banking, filing, etc. It was a big relief that she had the inherent skills necessary, as I had neither the time nor the inclination.

Some of the scripts were in Hindi. Since I could not read Hindi, Uma read the script aloud for me to write out in Urdu. I got into the habit of doing a lot of homework for my roles. I enacted some scenes at home. I improvised. I worked on giving my characters new dimensions and varying mannerisms.

Other satisfactory roles followed: *Kati Patang* (1970), *Prem Pujari* (1970), *Himmat* (1970), *Aap Aye Bahaar Ayee* (1971), *Keemat* (1973), *Mehbooba* (1976), *Jadu Tona* (1977), *Aas Paas* (1981) and many more.

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Films with South Indian Producers

South Indian producers were names to reckon with at that time. *Waris*, released in 1969, was a big hit. It was a remake of a Tamil film and starred Jeetendra, Hema Malini, Mehmood and child artiste Neetu Singh. I was appreciated for my role and the gates of the Tamil film industry were thrown open to me. I was newly married then and had taken Uma for this shoot.

The banners from the South were famous for being disciplined and professional; it was an entirely different experience working for them. I signed up with Dhoondi pictures where I became a permanent fixture. I also worked with Vauhini Studios and D. Ramanaidu. In fact, I was offered the movie *Himmat,* produced by P. Mallikarjuna Rao, thanks to the success of *Waris*.

Himmat starred Jeetendra and Mumtaz in the lead roles. My oft-repeated dialogue in the movie was '*Mera Raghu* (Jeetendra) *kahan hai* (Where is my Raghu)?' It became popular on with the public and my fans repeated this dialogue whenever they saw me. I was nominated for the Best Supporting Actor that year. Nominated, but did not win. This disappointing trend continued every year till 1976, when I realized my dream of holding a Filmfare Award with *Do Anjaane* (1976).

Jawab (1970) starred Ashok Kumar, Meena Kumari and Jeetendra. Ashok Kumar was a thespian, a seasoned actor. My role was negative and I was shown getting married to Jeetendra's sweetheart. Once, I was shooting a scene where I had to hold the locket around Jeetu's neck and wait for a snake to materialize out of a hole and bite him. When the snake appeared, I froze. I forgot my act completely and clutched the locket so tightly that I started choking Jeetu. The unit had to tear us apart.

In another scene, I thought I had to speak loudly. Dadamoni, as Ashok Kumar was affectionately called by the industry people, gently admonished me: 'You don't have to speak so loudly. Keep your voice under control.' Meena Kumari seconded this advice. I took their suggestions seriously and bettered myself. This film went on to be a jubilee hit.

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1972
Film: *Daag*

Raakhee is in love with Prem Chopra. The scene starts with a clichéd dialogue of the 1970s:

Raakhee: *Dheeraj, main tumhare bacche ki maa banne wali hoon.* (Dheeraj, I am pregnant with your child.)

Prem Chopra looks bored.

Raakhee: *Dheeraj, mujhe bada dar lag raha hai, batao kab karenge shaadi.* (Dheeraj, I am scared, tell me, when are we getting married.)

Prem: *Shaadi? Huh! Is tarah shaadiyaan karoon, toh mujhe dus hazaar karni padengi.* (Marry? This way, I'll have to marry innumerable times.)

Raakhee (acting dumb): *Kya matlab?* (What do you mean?)

Prem: *Matlab yeh, main toh kai ladkiyoon ke saath hota hoon. Iska yeh matlab toh nahi mein sabke saath shaadi karoon.* (I have slept with a lot of girls. It doesn't mean that I will marry all of them.)

Raakhee starts getting angry.

Prem Chopra continues: *Aur na jaane kis-kiske saath tum gayi ho. Aur bhagwaan jaane yeh baccha mera hai ya kisi aur ka.* (And who knows whether this child is mine or not.)

She raises her hand to slap him, but he stops her and pushes her off…

Now can you imagine this scene with Rajesh Khanna as the antagonist instead of me? While Rajesh Khanna was the heart-throb, a dream boyfriend and lover, I was the antithesis. Around this time one magazine put me on its cover with the line, 'The man with the hero's face becomes topmost villain.'

Rajesh Khanna, a superstar by now, and I had become a strong team.

★

Do Raaste came after *Woh Kaun Thi*. It was a classic. I had a great role in it as a henpecked husband with a lot of shades. My pairing with Bindu was formed in this film and later established in *Kati Patang*.

The film was directed by Raj Khosla. He was a relaxed director. Even though it was his own production, he was more of a director. He would brood over some problem and call it a day if he was

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not energized for the shot. His movies were made with a great deal of love. Raj Khosla liked to take long shots in songs, a style that was eventually followed by Manoj Kumar. *Do Raaste* was a family-oriented movie and did very well in India and overseas.

Doli (1969), another film with Rajesh Khanna, was also a top grosser that year. I had to do playback for a song, a new thing for me. I played Prem Kumar, who changes from a good man to a bad one. My character goes to America and is taken to a nightclub where the seeds of descent into Western corruption are sown. The movie, like many others which I starred in, was pretty much a morality tale. It was directed by the eminent South Indian director from Madras (now Chennai), Adurthi Subba Rao.

After *Do Raaste* and *Doli*, Rajesh Khanna and I continued to star in several films together: *Kati Patang, Mehbooba, Ajanabee* (1974) and *Prem Nagar* (1974). We were considered a hit pair. We had nineteen releases in our joint careers, of which fifteen were hits.

Shakti Samanta once told me that the distributors used to ask him, *'Picture mein Rajesh Khanna toh hai par Prem Chopra bhi hai ke nahin?'* They were keen on a Rajesh Khanna movie as he was the reigning superstar, but they also wanted Prem Chopra in the film. It seemed to be the hit formula those days.

Rajesh Khanna and I became good friends. I was still a bachelor during the making of *Do Raaste* and after pack up we would go to my apartment. He loved his drink, and would carry on late into the night, unable to make it on time the next morning. I would be on the dot for a 9 a.m. shift, whereas Rajesh Khanna would arrive at 11 a.m. He was 'The Superstar' so these foibles were tolerated. But once on the sets, he was totally involved and very hard-working.

1970 saw the release of *Kati Patang*, a thumping box office success. I played the blackmailer Kailash, whom the heroine initially loves. On the day of her wedding she leaves to elope with Kailash, only to find him in the arms of another woman.

The story and screenplay of *Kati Patang* was written by Gulshan Nanda. The movie was adapted from a novel. I had read this novel and would meet him often on the sets. In fact, Gulshanji always saw me with the novel as I kept reading it over and over again. I loved that role and wanted to be true to it. He grew very fond of me while we were shooting.

Uma was a big fan of Gulshan Nanda and he presented her his entire collection of books. Sometimes he would ask her opinion on a story of his and she would always be very frank with her views. Respecting her honest feedback, he would often ask her what she thought of a new subject.

Besides *Kati Patang,* I acted in a lot of films written by him like *Daag, Jheel Ke Us Paar* (1973), *Jugnu* (1973), *Ajanabee, Mehbooba* (1976) and *Azaad* (1978).

Rakita was born the year *Kati Patang* was released. I was in Madras shooting for a film when I received a call that my wife had been taken to Breach Candy Hospital and had delivered a baby girl. After Rakita's birth, Uma and I shifted from a one-bedroom apartment in Malabar Hill to a penthouse in Pali Hill.

Daag was Yash Chopra's first film after parting ways with his brother B.R. Chopra. He knew me well. My negative role in the film was centred around both the heroines. It was made at the height of Rajesh Khanna's career and was a super hit at the box office.

Another successful film that Rajesh Khanna and I did together in the seventies was *Prem Nagar.* This was a Tollywood blockbuster produced by D. Ramanaidu and directed by Prakash Rao. The film was originally made in Telugu and Tamil with A. Nageswara Rao and Sivaji Ganesan in the leads, respectively. The Hindi version had Rajesh Khanna and Hema Malini in the romantic leads. I played Rajesh Khanna's ruthless older brother. My performance was applauded.

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Ajanabee was another film by Shakti Samanta when Rajesh Khanna was reigning supreme. Rajesh Khanna's tardiness was a problem, but his star status ensured that no one could question him. Everyone would complain behind his back, but when he came on the sets it would be work as usual. Once, when Girija Samanta was particularly impatient, I said, 'Today's shoot will have me holding a cane, I will thrash him with it and you can be satisfied.' It became a joke. However, once Rajesh Khanna walked in, no one shared the 'joke' with him.

I found Shakti Samanta to be a patient director. In fact, he was one of the best directors of that era. His movies were popular. Being a Bengali, he had that great sense of a good script. He was a jolly man. He would call me RADA and tell people, 'Prem has studied at the RADA Institute, short for Royal Academy of Dramatic Art,' before adding, 'of Rohtak, not London.' (Actually, the acronym RADA was coined by S. Prakash, the director of *Aamne Saamne*.)

Subsequently, the same team got together for *Mehbooba* (with Hema Malini). We shot in Kulu Manali and Mahableshwar. Directed by Shakti Samanta for producers Mushir–Riaz, the plot was based on Gulshan Nanda's novel *Sisakte Saaz*. The film was about reincarnation. My track was in the present lifetime. I played Appa, who wants to marry a fellow gypsy Jhumri, played by Hema Malini. The film was a hit and I was nominated for Best Supporting Actor for the role. I ended up with two nominations as the Best Actor in a Supporting Role that year, for *Mehbooba* and *Do Anjaane*.

Another movie with Rajesh Khanna was *Maha Chor* (1976), produced and directed by Narendra Bedi. Narendra Bedi and Rajesh Khanna were good friends. The movie also starred Neetu Singh. I had to fight with a cheetah in this film, and I was able to do it without fear. I was scared of snakes, not cheetahs. Consequently, I was able to perform the scene without a double. Post *Maha Chor*, I was nicknamed 'Tiger' by some of my collegues, who continue to address me by that name even today.

The fashion at the time had me wearing a black and white houndstooth-checked suit, huge horn-rimmed glasses and, of course, the long sideburns.

As I was a regular in all Rajesh Khanna films, all a critic had to say during *Tyaag* (1977) was, 'Prem Chopra, another regular Rajesh Khanna co-star, is also there to do his bit.'

When Rajesh Khanna's popularity was at its peak, I saw producers queuing up to meet him at studios. I would feel embarrassed for them as they waited endlessly—they were celebrated names in their own right. Once, at Mahalaxmi Studio, during the making of *Tyaag* I told Rajesh Khanna, 'Just go and finish your meeting with them.' But they had to wait, and they continued to do so, for this was 'The Rajesh Khanna'.

Films with Rajesh Khanna

Do Raaste (1969); *Doli* (1969); *Kati Patang* (1970); *Daag* (1973); *Ajnabee* (1974); *Prem Nagar* (1974); *Mehbooba* (1976); *Maha Chor* (1976); *Tyaag* (1977); *Aanchal* (1980); *Jaanwar* (1983); *Souten* (1983); *Maqsad* (1984); *Awaaz* (1984); *Shatru* (1986); *Oonche Log* (1985); *Ghar Parivaar* (1991)

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Purab Aur Pachhim

Another important film, *Purab Aur Pachhim* (1970), was released around the same time as *Kati Patang*. It was shot in London, Simla and Bombay and dealt with Indians settled in England, as well as the generation gap. Manoj Kumar had written the story himself and he knew that it entailed travel. Yet when the time came, he could not bring himself to fly to London. His fear of flying was so acute that he felt nauseated if he even went to the airport. Finally, he was given a tranquilizer and boarded the aircraft with his eyes fixed on the propellers. The route was via Rome and the minute the aircraft landed there, Manoj disembarked and reached London by boat. The film, however, was a trendsetter and is a recognized classic now.

I was totally involved with the shooting. There is a scene where Pran saab, who played my father, had to hit me and it had to be shot several times. When the shot was finally done, Pran saab said, 'God bless you, you have a great amount of patience!' Dadamoni also appreciated my diligence and said, 'You will be on the top.' I was already in the limelight then.

Saira Banu was married by this time. This was my second film with her, the first being *Jhuk Gaya Aasman*. There was a dramatic rape sequence in the film which required her cooperation. These kind of scenes demand a professional attitude. Saira, to her credit, was a thorough professional.

Recently, director Vipul Shah told me that he played that very scene for his actors to absorb whilst shooting a similar sequence in *Namastey London* (2007).

Yaadgaar (1970) with Manoj Kumar was shot in the Udaipur palace. I played the role of Prince Prem Singh and Nutan was the heroine. It was directed by Sita Ram Sharma and scripted by Manoj Kumar, though Manoj Kumar was the unofficial director of this movie too. The actors would turn to him for guidance. This was a jubilee hit.

Manoj Kumar and I have a bond that has lasted over fifty years. We worked in almost thirteen films together. *Sanyasi* (1970), a jubilee hit of mine with Manoj Kumar, was ranked amongst the top ten highest grossing films in that year. We shot this film near Haridwar.

BeImaan (1972) was another film where we were co-actors. It was produced and directed by Sohanlal Kanwar and was a jubilee hit. It was a well made film, and I was satisfied with my work.

I remember that we were not able to finish the film on schedule and I had to leave, having given my next set of dates elsewhere. It was a tough decision since Manoj Kumar and Premnath wanted me to stay back and complete the shoot. But I chose to keep to the schedule committed earlier and promised Manoj Kumar that I would come back later. All parties compromised and my portions were shot separately at a later stage.

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The Anand Brothers

Dev Anand was the first among the 'trinity' that I had the opportunity to work with. It was during *Duniya* (1968), directed by T. Prakash Rao, that I met him for the first time. Dev was a handsome man; when you looked at him, you saw a star. He was hard-working and involved in his work; a stylish actor and disciplined in his ways. He would reach on time; concerned only with his work and minding his business. That is what I learnt from him, 'To stay in this profession, don't mind other people's business, just mind your own.'

Dev's charisma was unmatched; if he was in a movie, 90 per cent of the audience would be women.

Prem Pujari was Dev's first directorial venture for Navketan films. It was also the first time I went abroad—an added excitement for me. My father was in Bombay those days and he, too, was thrilled as he came to see me off at the airport. No one had gone abroad from our family until then.

On this trip, I behaved exactly like a villager on his first visit to the big city. We went to Zurich via Cairo, where we stayed a night. The film was shot in London, Switzerland and India. I remember thinking, People are the same everywhere; it is just our limited perception that makes us believe they are different. It's the same with important people—the larger in stature, the more accessible to all. Everybody is actually quite normal and ordinary.

One quirk about Dev was the way he said 'Action'. If it was a dramatic scene he would say 'Action' loudly; for a romantic scene he would say it softly, sweetly. Being an actor himself, he used the bhav (expression) with 'Action', thus setting the mood for us.

He was enthusiastic about his work and would write his own scripts and dialogues; it also meant that he did not like anyone interfering with his style of work. A strong personality, he was capable of influencing you to the extent that you ended up talking like him even after you came home. I remember an incident when he was explaining a scene to an actor in his inimitable style. The actor, completely influenced by Dev's style, mimicked him during the scene. Dev turned around and asked him, 'If you speak like me, how should I be speaking?'

Haré Rama Haré Krishna (1971) was my second film with Dev. He liked me as an actor and repeated me in many other films. It was the first film to be shot in Kathmandu and Dev Anand had unlimited access, thanks to the king of Nepal. The king, keen to increase tourism, encouraged Indian filmmakers to shoot in his country. We were given discounted rates at the Hotel Soaltee too.

Rajendranath (who was also in the movie) and Dev's nephew Baba were part of that shooting schedule. Baba and I decided to play a prank on Rajendranath and told him that we had some great female company. Rajendranath arrived promptly and Baba just couldn't control his laughter. Rajendranath took it sportingly—he was a simple man, much loved.

There is an interesting story behind how I got the role in *Haré Rama Haré Krishna*. Dev called me to his office one evening, saying that he needed two hours to narrate a role to me. I was shooting for *Purab Aur Pachhim* those days. I informed Manoj Kumar of my appointment and reached the Navketan office at exactly 5 p.m.

Dev said in his inimitable style, 'You have arrived at the wrong time. Kathmandu belongs to you.

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You are a king! I will brief you in detail when you get to Kathmandu. Now, I have to go somewhere urgently.' Saying this, he took off.

In Kathmandu, I prepared for this role. I worked on the behaviour of a king, his grace, his stance, his walk. In the first scene, an ordinary man (also part of the scene) pushes me. I was upset and said to Dev, 'You told me I was to be king; what happened?' He replied, 'Trust me, see aage.' I realized that my best course was to go along with the film as he envisioned it. I am glad I did so; when the movie released, I became very popular as Drona saab.

Dev made work seem like fun with his sense of humour; I remember how the effect of his energy would remain in me for days after the shoot! I recall the ace cameraman Fali Mistry being told by Dev in Kathmandu to take a particular shot from the top of a peak. I must admit that the peak looked pretty intimidating, and yet suddenly we saw Dev up there, cajoling Mistry to climb up too. His enthusiasm was truly infectious!

He told me that he wanted to write and direct films himself because he felt that only he was capable of showcasing his subject to best advantage. He wrote the dialogues for his movies in English and translated them into Hindi, and he was open to change if we disagreed with the translations!

Dev inspired everyone on the sets. He was totally motivated and expected you to be equally engrossed in the making of the film. I remember that we shot day and night for *Haré Rama Haré Krishna*, exploring every avenue to improve it. The movie was one of the biggest hits of the time.

Des Pardes (1978), under his banner Navketan, was another film that I went on to do with him. This film, which he also wrote and directed, was a big hit too.

The subject for *Des Pardes* had been in his mind for a while before he started work on it. The film's set was an imaginary London pub, Sam & Nam, which was used for nearly forty-five days of shooting. One scene had Ajit, Dev and me. Dev walks in seeking a job and Ajit says, 'Nothing here, go off now.' After one take, Dev went up to Ajit and said something to him. Ajit nodded. The shot started once again and Ajit now said, '*Naujawan, andar aao* (Young man, come in),' lines that were not part of the dialogue sheet. It was quite amusing. The hero had to be a hero.

Dev was stylish—a superstar in his own way. He may not have had the depth of Dilip Kumar or Raj Kapoor but he was as popular in his own charismatic way. He was a favourite with girls. They would bunk college to watch his films. He was extremely conscious of his age and continued to play a hero even when he was eighty-eight.

One more time Dev called me and said 'Prem, I have a terrific role for you in *Lootmaar* [1980]. Come and meet me.' I went immediately. He plied me with beer and food before he continued, 'Prem, Simla belongs to you.' Again that grand one-line description—I had a feeling of déjà vu. I knew then that much like *Haré Rama Haré Krishna* where Kathmandu belonged to me, the narration was over.

When *Mr Prime Minister*, a Dev Anand film, was released in 2005, we went by invitation to Ahmedabad for an open air premiere. An interesting incident follows. Narendra Modi was present at another premiere in the same theatre and he said, '*Prem Chopra ke saath family relationship hai* (I have a family relationship with Prem Chopra).' He knew my brother Brahm, who was working in Ahmedabad at the time.

At *Mr Prime Minister*'s premiere, I overheard the exhibitor and distributor arguing over the amount spent on the premiere when it was evident that the film would flop. The tide had turned for Dev. I instantly recalled asking Dev during our *Lootmaar* days how he could keep on making movies when filmmakers decided to retire if they had two flops in a row.

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Dev's reply embodied the immortal filmmaker in him, 'I make films the way I wish to. I try to make successful films. But if they don't work, well, they don't! I look forward to the next day and I forge ahead. Prem, I don't look back at yesterday; and since tomorrow is uncertain, I enjoy what I am doing today. If the audience does not like a film of mine, I will make another, because I want to keep working.' That was his philosophy!

During *Lootmaar,* most of the people around Dev were younger than him, and yet they failed to keep pace with him. Dev was bouncing around the sets like a nineteen-year-old. Even the American who had come in from Hollywood for the special effects said, 'Where does this fifty-year-old man get his energy? What is the secret of his youthful vitality?'

I shared a good rapport with his brother Vijay Anand too. I was in one of Vijay's first movies, *Teesri Manzil,* which was shot around the same time as *Upkar*. I was offered this film during the making of *Shaheed*. Interestingly, this role also came about thanks to the Gaylord restaurant—a hub for the film industry in those days. I met producer Nasir Hussain as I was sitting with Rajendranath one day and told him that I was looking for a break. He asked me to meet Vijay and show him my work. Accordingly I did so and showed him some rushes of *Shaheed* at Bombay Lab. He saw a dramatic scene between me and Manoj Kumar, and turned around to say, 'You are on!'

Film critic Bikram Singh, brother of the legendary villain K.N. Singh, gave me a special mention, 'Prem Chopra acted very well and he will go very far.'

I developed a close rapport with Shammi Kapoor and Vijay Anand during this time.

Chhupa Rustam (1973) was my second film with Vijay. My flair for comedy is evident in this movie. I wore a typical seventies' costume. I sported a thin moustache with sideburns and one of my costumes was a yellow suit with black velvet on the shoulders pads and pockets, and—certainly not for the faint-hearted—red trousers. Whenever Hema Malini (the heroine) paid me attention, my expression had to change to that of a lovesick puppy.

Vijay was a great director. Hema was unable to come to Simla so he shot her sequences in Mehboob studio. He was a great editor with a terrific sense of music and a director par excellence. He also loved to act.

I saw *Chhupa Rustam* once again recently; you just cannot tell that Hema was missing that day. Her shots are so flawlessly incorporated into those scenes.

Later I did *Ram Balram* (1980) with Vijay too.

Between the two brothers, I always thought that Dev should have remained an actor, leaving Goldie (Vijay Anand) to be the director. They both wanted to be what the other was; and in the process, compromised what they were masters at.

Movies with Dev Anand and Vijay Anand:

Dev Anand: *Duniya* (1968); *Prem Pujari** (1970); *Hare Rama Hare Krishna** (1971); *Lootmaar** (1980); *Des Pardes** (1978); *Sache Ka Bol Bala* (1989); *Return Of Jewel Thief* (1996); *Mr. Prime Minister** (2005)

Vijay Anand: *Teesri Manzil* (1966); *Chuppa Rustam* (1973); *Ram Balram* (1980)

**for Navketan*

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Most actors of my generation—and I am no exception—have been influenced and inspired by two actors: Dilip Kumar in Bollywood and Marlon Brando in Hollywood. When I set out for Bombay, my father gave me some advice, 'If you have made up your mind to join this risky business, then make sure you model yourself on Dilip Kumar.' Later in life, when I got to know Yusuf saab (Dilip Kumar's real name), I narrated this incident to him. He was amused, but then advised me seriously that I had potential and needed to think carefully before taking up any role. So influenced was I by his advice that I actually rejected some offers before accepting the reality that though my idol was Dilip Kumar, I was Prem Chopra, with the responsibilities of a family. This realization made me start accepting roles again. You may go to film institutes, and you may be enamoured by senior actors, but life is about creating your own style. Self-experience is the truest teacher. Now, after all these years, I know that I have given my best to my profession; I feel like a complete actor!

Dastaan (1972) was my first film with B.R. Chopra. It was also my first film with my idol, Dilip Kumar. I was to play the bad man in *Dastaan*; it was like a dream come true that I was to play villain against my hero, Yusuf saab. I was very happy; I was petrified. I signed the film, feeling it was too good to be true. Shooting started and I could literally feel my legs shaking as I saw him coming towards me. I was totally in awe of the man I had until now only read about in magazines. He shook hands and embraced me warmly and I felt a strong current of positivity passing through me. He talked gently, asking me to forget who he was and only remember the character he was playing. It was nigh impossible for me to do so; the only thing I felt like doing was giving up and running away. He kept on talking to me patiently till I relaxed. And when work started finally, I wish I could tell you what a great experience it was for me. Watching my idol at work, I realized the importance of hard work, of doing your homework before coming to the sets, of being dedicated; above all, being sympathetic and understanding towards the younger generation.

We built up a fantastic rapport during the making of the film. There were times when I found it difficult to believe that I was sitting with 'The Dilip Kumar' and cracking jokes. There were other times when he enlightened me on various subjects and I realized what a learned and knowledgeable man he was. He gave me some useful tips that have stood me in good stead all along, one of them being, 'Don't play it loud.'

He knew that I adored and worshipped him. He knew that I believed him to be the God of acting. I never left the set when he was working; I could not get enough of observing him. We did some good scenes together. His encouragement led me to greater heights.

My work in *Dastaan* led to my role in *Bairaag* (1976). It was at a party hosted by B.R. Chopra that Yusuf saab took me aside and narrated the role to me. He was excited and I was thrilled by the confidence he was placing in me. It was a big honour for me. *Bairaag* was the first film in which he was playing a triple role and I was to be the only villain. I played the character of Kunwar Pratap Singh. I was a bankrupt prince, a suitor for Tara, played by Saira Banu.

Yusuf saab lived the film; he was involved in every aspect, right from ghostwriting the screenplay to editing. He would scream for the 27th retake. Perhaps it was perceived as his

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desire to dominate, but my personal experience differed. I know that all his suggestions stemmed only from a desire to excel. He displayed so much faith in me that it went a long way in helping me grow as an actor.

Yusuf saab's contribution to Indian cinema is immeasurable. Critics felt that he had the film revolving around him. But I was the only villain in *Bairaag*, pitted against his three characters. He knew that the villain was important and had to be as strong as the hero. He took it in his stride, for the film was more important to him than himself. To my mind, his attitude was exemplary.

In *Bairaag*, there is a scene in a tehkhana (cellar) where a treasure is hidden, and the snake guarding it suddenly appears. I had to grab the snake and deliver my dialogue, but I was petrified. Yusuf saab intervened and saved the day. He asked me to hold a stick and said, 'We will hang the snake on this stick; perhaps that can soothe your fears!' It was great working with the thespian; the way he would work on every scene and every detail was incredible.

I once saw him rehearse a scene in English, Urdu and Punjabi. I never expected that such a great actor would rehearse in three languages. After that, I started doing the same.

Around the same time, I happened to be shooting with Jeetendra and Amitabh Bachchan for *Gehri Chaal* (1973) and they wondered what I could be doing in my room for such long periods of time. One day, unable to contain their curiosity any longer, they burst into my room to find that I was rehearsing my dialogues in three languages. They laughed and later related the incident to Dilip Kumar; he just smiled. I was rewarded for the effort I put in with rehearsing in three languages when a critic reviewing *Gehri Chaal* said, 'Prem Chopra as Madan is about as evil as expected.'

My daughter once asked me the reason behind the three languages. Her father-in-law, writer Gulshan Nanda, also had a three-language philosophy. He used to say, 'I think in Punjabi, I write in Urdu but my books are finally for a Hindi audience.' My personal belief as an actor is that it helps to get the feel of the dialogues. And this was the great Dilip Kumar's way of getting under the skin of his character.

Everyone knew he was a great actor, but few were privy to how hard he worked to remain so. He would keep asking for retakes till he was satisfied with his own performance. Another valuable lesson that I learnt—no one can afford to rest on their laurels.

We worked together in Manoj Kumar's *Kranti* (1981) and Yash Johar's *Duniya* (1984). Working with him broadened my horizons. He has been the inspiration behind my success in the industry.

Dilip Kumar speaks chaste Urdu interspersed with high-flown English words. We were in a large gathering once when he started talking to me in Urdu. My Urdu is good but certainly not of his calibre. When I replied, he looked puzzled for a minute because my answer had no relevance to what he'd said. He caught on, however, and we kept it up for a while. The others just didn't know what was happening. Yet another time, we tried this in French though we hardly knew the language. Everybody was impressed.

Being close to Yusuf saab also gave me an insight into his mind, both as an actor and a person. Perfection is his life; he drives himself ruthlessly. It is only when this commitment falls short in others that he tries to get involved in other aspects of a film. Perhaps it is this single-minded quest that is perceived as interference. He does interfere, he does insist on changes, but only to make a good film, in the hope of extracting better performances. Give him a good script and a good director, and then sit back to watch a flawless performance. I have seen him surrendering totally to good directors like Manoj Kumar during *Kranti,* Ramesh Talwar during *Duniya,* and I believe it was the same with Subhash Ghai too. He may have made a suggestion or two, but these directors were the final judges.

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The moral of the story is, you go to Dilip Kumar fully prepared; or you don't go to him at all.

I have seen him meeting heads of state and crowned heads with an inborn grace that has to be seen to be believed. Even the greatest of them have acknowledged the sheer magnetism of his presence. I have seen him with people in the streets, greeting and talking as if he was one of them. His critics are quick to call it an act, an extension of his portrayal in films; I beg to disagree. I know it is second nature to the man—part of his large heart, his upbringing, his culture. He has the greatest love for his colleagues and contemporaries and goes out of his way to be of help to them. He has been the driving force behind some of the biggest charity shows organized to collect funds for worthy causes. True to his nature, once he takes up a cause, he doesn't rest till everything is worked out to perfection.

If I had to acknowledge the greatest blessing bequeathed to me by films, I would unhesitatingly say it is Dilip Kumar. We are very good friends even after so many years; I am still in awe of the maestro.

Films with Dilip Kumar
Dastaan (1972), *Bairaag* (1976), *Kranti* (1981), *Duniya* (1984)

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The early 1970s
Film: *Pocket Maar*
Location: Panchgani

The climax was to be shot. The scene required Dharmendra to be dragged by my cronies, seated in a jeep. Dharmendra was getting ready for his shot and tying a leather contraption with a leather jacket. Worried, I took Dharmendra's cousin Narendra aside and told him, 'I hope Dharam is not going to do such a risky shot himself. What if he gets bruises on his face? He is an actor, he shouldn't do that.'

Narendra agreed and went to speak with his brother. 'Prem is talking sense; you are an actor and cannot afford cuts on your face.' Dharam took one look at me and burst into hearty laughter. He came to me and said, 'Prem, I know why you are so worried about me doing this stunt.'

I was in a fix; I had been caught out. Yet, I tried one last time, keeping a straight face, 'Why not use a double to do it?'

Dharam questioned, 'Why are you asking me over and over again?'

And then I confessed sheepishly, 'Because it will then [later] be your turn to drag me.' We both burst out laughing.

Dharmendra went ahead and performed the stunt without a double that day. Later that night when we were having our drinks I accused him of putting me in a fix, *'Yaar tuney toh mujhe aaj phasa hi diya.'* The next day I felt obliged to do my part of the stunt without a double. It still remains a joke between us.

Pocket Maar was released in 1974, but it had taken many years in the making. The movie starts with me playing Saira Banu's love interest. The title song actually shows us romancing, singing a duet. Of course, the hero of the film takes over later.

Dharam and I were shooting for *Phandebaaz* (1978) in Bangalore. It was almost midnight and I had been feeling cold and feverish all day. I went up to Dharam and said, 'Let's pack up.' He too seemed tired and replied, 'Yes Prem, let's continue tomorrow.'

Dharmendra had been shooting for two films in those days—*Sholay* (1975) through the day and *Phandebaaz* from 7.30 p.m. to late in the night. We went to his room and he settled down for a drink. I did not touch drinks when I was working, plus I was not feeling well. He recommended Coca-Cola with whisky for me. I was reluctant. Next, he pressed me to have brandy. He made a large brandy and added some water. The amount he drank was sure to affect the liver in the long run. I could barely manage a sip or two.

After a few drinks he would say, 'Prem Awaargi, recite some poetry.' I needed no excuse and would immediately burst into verse, '*Prem Awaargi, arz karta hai…*' He would call me 'Awaargi' and I would call him 'Deewangi'. We would sit up together way past midnight nursing our drinks, while I would recite some of my own poetry and some that he insisted were borrowed. We had some wonderful sessions together. The movie too fared well.

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Around the same time, Dharmendra and I were also shooting for *Keemat* (1973). I played a don and wore a golden wig for this role. One scene required Dharmendra and Rekha to be tied up as I sat on a throne, laughing maniacally. On either side of the throne were six ferocious dogs, which were being kept quiet in readiness for the shot.

The director called for action and I started my manic laughter, resulting in the dogs springing up to growl at me. I leaped up from my throne, forgetting that the shot was in progress, really scared. The director shot the scene several times with the same result, till he had the brainwave of shooting the sequence in close-ups. This time, we sailed through.

When Pramod Chakravorty was looking at options for the cast of *Jugnu*, Gulshan Nanda, who was the writer of the film, said, 'Prem Chopra would fit this role perfectly!' I was cast for the role. It was a fifty-week super hit movie. I added a shade of comedy to the film, which people found funny and interesting.

My son-in-law Rahul recently remarked, 'My father, Gulshan Nanda, would have certain characters in mind while writing his stories, and one of them would invariably be Prem Chopra.'

Dharmendra was a warm, uninhibited person. Hema was aloof yet dignified. She was very focused on her roles. It was a comfortable working relationship and I was always very happy with them.

Other films that were adapted from Gulshan Nanda's novels and starred Dharmendra and me were *Jheel Ke Us Paar* and *Azaad*. Both were hits.

In *Jheel Ke Us Paar,* the reason behind why the villain becomes the way he is was depicted for the first time. Both Dharmendra and I had the same father, only I was the illegitimate child. So my character wanted his father's name and 50 per cent of the property, which he felt was rightfully his. Before that, a character used to be only black or white.

Dharmendra once said about me: 'Prem and I have similar dancing styles and he dances in rhythm. We enjoy regaling the audience. During the shooting of *Azaad*, Ajit saab and I would force Prem to play rummy with us. He played with us upto the day he lost a lot of money and said, "This is it, no more!" We continued to cajole him to play with us till he too started enjoying the game. Soon we were playing regularly between shots.'

Azaad was produced by Pramod Chakravorty. I was the suitor of Rajkumari, played by Hema Malini. Here, too, I played a villain with comic shades. A distributor called up Chakti-da in my presence and said, 'Prem Chopra's comical performance is a hit. The masses love it.'

One of the songs, 'Main Hoon Teri Prem Diwani', was picturized on Hema Malini and me. I danced to this song, which was a great hit. Suddenly all the producers who were working with me at the time wanted similar dances in their films. Some were even willing to make changes in the script. Scenes were being added to ensure that I performed at least one dance in a film. This is how you get typecast! A reviewer in *Screen* said about me in *Azaad*, 'Prem Chopra is hilarious when he dances.'

Later I went on to do *Dream Girl* (1977) with the same team.

Once, were shooting in Udaipur for a hilarious song sequence in *Raja Jani* (1972). The heroine (Hema Malini) wants to make the hero (Dharmendra) jealous. She pretends to be in love with my character. Mohan Saigal was the director and the dance director was P.L. Raj. After the scene was described to me I told them, 'This is a ghisa pita situation! Let's develop it as though I am falling in love and start dancing in exhilaration.'

They were unwilling, 'No, it will be loud, it will not look nice.'

'Let's at least try it,' I said. They came around and when I performed bhangra to the beat, the cameraman collapsed laughing. P.L. Raj couldn't believe his eyes. The Delhi distributor told us later

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that this scene had the whole hall laughing uproariously. Sometimes actors' input works wonders. *Raja Jani* was a big hit and this was one of the highlights!

Alibaba Aur 40 Chor (1980) was an Indo–Russian production. We shot this film in Jaipur and Russia. It was co-directed by Umesh Mehra. The Russian director Latif Faiziyev had apprehensions about me. He told Umesh Mehra that my face was too soft for a villain; he wanted someone tough. Umesh Mehra replied, 'You just wait and watch. Let the cameras roll.' Faiziyev was impressed and clapped in appreciation. Later he gave me a cap as a memento.

I played a fabulously rich caliph of a mythical Arabian Nights' kingdom in this film—he is enchanted by a slave princess from India, played by Hema Malini, and claps his hands and commands her to dance. He then steps down from his throne and starts to dance with her! The scene is completely comical. Hema Malini would burst into peals of laughter between scenes. I just loved my dances. Some snakes had to be introduced towards the end of this song and I remember being very conscious of them coming towards me. But by that time, I was a seasoned actor; I managed to control my repulsion and fears.

Doing different genres helped me gain a wide audience. Children, for instance, enjoyed my role in *Ali Baba*. I received more fan letters from children than adults after this movie was released. However busy I was, I always made time to read all these letters carefully and reply to them. To have the love of so many children is one of the most wonderful experiences of life.

I have worked with Dharmendra in innumerable films. He was a frequent visitor at my place, like all my other friends in the industry. I just had to tell him to drop in for a drink in the evening and he would arrive promptly. He's basically a simple and clean-hearted guy. He would share whatever was on his mind; we were that close. We still are!

Dharmendra reminisces

Prem is very popular with directors because he is a very good actor. He is also popular with his producers and his colleagues because he is a very good human being. Initially we would meet around Churchgate when we would both be hanging out at the Gaylord restaurant. I used to see this 'gora chitta' handsome man who I knew was trying to get into films. I would think to myself that this guy was going to make it someday. I didn't know then that he was trying for negative roles. Later when we worked together, we broke the ice, literally and figuratively, and got to know each other. He was a moderate drinker. I would like my drinks in the evening. One thing about Prem is that he walks into a room, adding positive energy. Both of us may have moved on with our respective lives, but whenever we meet, we renew our relationship from that moment itself. I've had great times with him; I wish that era was back. His parents named him aptly. He is truly a man everyone loves.

Films with Dharmendra

Raja Jani (1972), *Jugnu* (1973), *Jheel Ke Us Paar* (1973), *Pocketmaar* (1974), *Keemat* (1973), *Dream Girl* (1977), *Phandebaaz* (1978), *Azaad* (1978), *Ram Balram* (1980), *Alibaba Aur 40 Chor* (1980), *Aas Paas* (1981), *Naseeb* (1981), *Do Dishayen* (1982), *Andhaa Kanoon* (1983), *Sitamgar* (1985), *Saveray Wali Gaadi* (1986), *Mard Ki Zabaan* (1987), *Watan Ke Rakhwale* (1987), *Hukumat* (1987), *Insaaf Ki Pukar* (1987), *Mahaveera* (1988), *Sikka* (1989), *Mast Kalandar* (1991), *Tahalka* (1992), *Virodhi* (1992), *Kshatriya* (1993), *Aazmayish* (1995), *Return*

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of Jewel Thief (1996), *Zulm O Sitam* (1998), *Hum Kaun Hai* (2004), *Ora Jara* (2004) (Bengali version of *Hum Kaun Hai*)

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Rajendra Kumar and I were friends till the very end. I dropped in to see him when he was ailing, and he said, '*Jab darwaza khulta hai toh mein uthke dekhta hoon kaun hai, phir mehsoos hota hai yeh toh hawa ka jhonka tha*.' (When the door opens I look to see who it is, and then I realize it is a gentle waft of breeze.)

I worked with almost every hero of the time. Rajendra was called the Jubilee Star as he had a phase where every movie of his was a jubilee hit. We did a lot of films together like *Jhuk Gaya Aasman, Anjaana, Aap Aye Bahaar Ayee* (1971) and *Gora Aur Kala* (1972). The last was shot in Jaipur with Rajendra in a double role. It was to be directed by Naresh Kumar, but after he fell out with the producer Raj Kumar Kohli, it was directed by Kohli himself. I had to do some horse-riding scenes, which I managed without any doubles. I remember getting a standing ovation from the unit.

Another film with Rajendra was *Do Jasoos* (1975), which was also a jubilee hit. Here I worked with Raj Kapoor as a co-actor for the first time, a real pleasure. Earlier, I had only faced the camera with him as the director for *Bobby*. It was fun shooting together in Alibagh and Pune. Raj-ji could never get up early, and consequently was never on time. Naresh Kumar, the producer, came up with a novel idea. He put up all the actors at the Taj Mahal Hotel and arranged that we catch the ferry to Alibaug (at about 10 a.m.) together for the shoot to start on time. Later Raj-ji and I worked in *Gopichand Jasoos* (1982) together.

1971 saw the release of *Aap Aye Bahaar Ayee,* a Mohan Kumar film. It starred Rajendra Kumar and Sadhana, both at the peak of their careers at that time. I had a dramatic role—I lose sight in my left eye in a fight, because of which I wear a false eye. This, naturally, increased my need for wanting revenge in the film. During the shooting and even in the trial shows I was applauded. My colleagues and well-wishers predicted that the film would be my launch pad to the big league. I would soon be at par with the likes of Raaj Kumar and needed to be selective in my choice of roles. Hoping all this would come true, I started refusing films. The film flopped and it taught me one valuable lesson: never believe in the success of a film before the public deem it successful; and do not put your eggs in one basket. Keep your options open at all times.

I am reminded of a quote by Cecil deMille. He was a successful filmmaker, but he too had his share of failures. When asked the secret behind making a successful film, he answered, 'The person who can predict these two things will be the richest man on earth:

1. A remedy to grow hair on balding heads and,
2. The ability to predict the success of a film before you actually start it.'

You can never, ever, predict the reaction of the audience.

I met Rajendra's brother-in-law, O.P. Ralhan, when I was struggling. He was a successful director after *Phool Aur Patthar* (1966). Our families had known each other—in fact, my father had arranged OP's sister's wedding. Paaji had also written a letter recommending me to OP. Nothing had worked out at that point in time, though we did films like *Hulchul* (1971) and *Paapi* (1977) later.

OP disliked guests on the sets; it disturbed his train of thought. He was very focused and very confident, much like today's directors. Our generation was not used to this. We offered suggestions,

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which were accepted when found sensible. There were no bound scripts, and it was normal for actors to improvise portions of a scene on the set itself. The directors were a mixed lot. Some would accept our creative input while others were rigid. In those days when movies were the only form of entertainment, some of our suggestions helped the films become silver jubilees. Nowadays, the bulk of the earnings are in the first three days. Times have changed!

Mohan Kumar, the director of *Aap Aye Bahar Ayee* and *Anjaana*, once said, 'If Prem was not happy with a scene he would voice it. I was amiable, because I was also the writer. There is always a natural rhythm to a dialogue and I felt that if he felt odd reading it, then he would feel odd shooting for it. I was the director and the writer; I was on the spot and willing to improvise if need be. To Prem's credit, he never imposed his suggestions. He would discuss the conception of his character with the director and the writer. Next, he would try to embellish it with shades of characters from previous movies of mine to improve upon it. He was observant and completely focused on his work. He was an educated man from a well-read family and it showed in his demeanour. My first impression of him was of an alert, agile and of course a very handsome man—an impressive personality.'

Hulchul was about three Mahesh Jaitleys, one of whom is suspected of wanting to kill his wife, Vedana, played by Anjali Kadam. Obviously, the audience suspected me. We were in Khandala for some shots deploying cars. One shot required me to turn the car around sharply, a challenge because there was a huge obstruction in the way. We had to do it two or three times before it was canned. It was a dangerous shot, and I was performing it without using a double. At one point the car slipped and I had a close call. I was shaken and came back to the room briefly before going back to the shoot.

I had developed some confidence for scenes with horses, having ridden them in many films. However, while shooting for *Do Jhoot* (1975) at China Creek, I fell from my horse and then it buckled to fall on me. The unit panicked. The trainer helped me to my feet and warned me that if I gave in to fear and did not mount the horse immediately, I would never be able to do so for the rest of my life. I took his advice seriously, and though still shaken and petrified, I was back on the horse to finish the shot.

Another stylish director who loved his horses was Feroz Khan. He signed me for his first directorial venture *Apradh* (1975), and I played his brother, a don. He was an extremely focused man when making a film. I thought Feroz was a good director; in fact, a better director than actor. He was supportive and would say, 'A new Prem Chopra is in the film. *Woh mujhe kaccha kha gaya*! (He overshadowed me!)' *Apradh*'s release had both critics and audiences applauding my performance.

Feroz and I paired up again for *Kala Sona*. I played a sadist with comic shade called Poppy Singh and had a false eye. I used special get-ups minimally, only when pivotal to the plot. The film begins with a murder to which a child is an eyewitness. The child grows up to be Feroz, who recognizes the murderer because of the false eye. The false eye was troublesome, a nightmare to fix. But it was a memorable role. Danny Denzongpa still calls me Poppy Singh.

Even though I was doing so many negative roles, I worked on changing the mannerisms to make each role interesting. A slight change, a different shade, an entirely new and menacing villain and finally a riveting performance. Most of the time, the changes were more through my acting rather than the get-ups (*Kala Sona* and *Aap Aye Bahaar Ayee* being notable exceptions). If I had not worked on varying my performances, the public would have written me off as routine and monotonous. I kept tabs on feedback from the audience; they found the changes interesting, they looked forward to my nuances. And that kept me in the adrenalin I required to continue without a break in my professional

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career.

A villain fits into a basic mould in a Hindi film. What sets him apart is the execution of a role.

An oblique recognition in this industry is when directors ask younger actors to model their performances on their seniors. When I was a newcomer, I was told, 'Observe Dilip Kumar's performance in *Foot Path* [1953],' or, 'Bring the same touch as Ashok Kumar did in *Deedar* [1951].' When I heard directors advising the younger lot, 'Model your act on Prem Chopra's performance in *Keemat*,' I knew I had arrived. I was now a sort of veteran villain!

Today, people appreciate a villain as much as they adore a successful hero. The writing on the wall began to change when the villain started being conceived intelligently, when people began to think, yes, this sort of character is possible in real life.

When I agree to do a certain character, I put a lot of work into it. I research the man and learn all I can about him. What is his background like? What regional language does he speak? To what economic class does he belong? What clothes would this man wear in a given situation? There are hundreds of questions to be answered about this man before I face the camera. All these little touches add up to a perfect whole. I never accepted each and every film that I was offered. I was selective, I only did those roles which I believed had some 'depth' and 'colour' to them. Is there something offbeat and colourful about this character? Does it offer possibilities? Does it offer a challenge? I asked myself these questions and only when I was satisfied did I go ahead.

By now I had come to the conclusion that I didn't have to use wigs to look smart, even though I had lost most of my hair. It was far more important to portray a character realistically. My sister Anju always told me that when I used get-ups it took away from the performance; she actually rated them a notch lower. She's right. Perhaps it is insecurity that makes you feel the audience would like to see you with a different get-up every time. But actually it is not so; it is your competence as an actor that makes you stay on top. And how do I look different in each film? I lay Prem Chopra aside, and don the personality of the character I portray.

Films with Rajendra Kumar

Jhuk Gaya Aasman (1968), *Anjaana* (1969), *Aap Aaye Bahar Aaye* (1971), *Gora Aur Kala* (1972), *Do Jhoot* (1975), *Do Jasoos* (1975), *Dhan Daulat* (1980)

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My Sister's Wedding

December 1971, Chandigarh

My sister Anju was to marry Deepak Dumra, a businessman from Ludhiana, on 6 December 1971. A grand wedding was planned and accordingly we brothers arrived at our father's house in Chandigarh on 2 December with our respective families. Uma and Rakita (barely a year old then) were with me.

We left for Ludhiana on the morning of 3 December for Anju's engagement and were returning to Chandigarh at about 7 p.m. when our car was stopped by the military to inform us that India and Pakistan were officially at war. They ordered us to drive the rest of the way to Chandigarh with our lights off.

Back in Chandigarh we were in a quandary; all arrangements had been made for the wedding. What was to be our next step? Finally, we decided to go ahead with the wedding the next morning, minus the fanfare. We began by calling all our outstation guests to tell them not to come for the wedding.

Anju was married in a simple morning ceremony on the day that East Pakistan was officially recognized as Bangladesh by India. We expected more hostilities. We were driving down to Ludhiana on 7 December for a reception by the groom's side when we were stopped midway and asked to go back to Delhi. All our plans for the wedding of our only sister were laid aside due to circumstances beyond our control.

The war officially ended on 16 December 1971.

Anju is very special to me. She was only nine when we lost our mother and since then she has been like a daughter to me, not a sister. I would always be hassled if anyone ill-treated her and my emotions are the same even today. She is a wonderful person—honest, loving and pure of heart.

I remember her coming from her husband's home once without informing us of her plans. I looked at her and without saying a word went to the adjoining room, beckoning Uma. I asked her, 'Has she fought with her husband and left her home?' Uma replied, 'No, it's a surprise visit! She just wanted to surprise you, as she thought you would be happy to see her.' Meanwhile, poor Anju was left wondering, 'I hope I did the right thing. Prem papa does not seem too happy to see me.' Once I was convinced all was well, I heaved a sigh of relief and celebrated her homecoming.

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'Duniya jaanti hai ki main kitna shareef aadmi hoon'.

This used to be one of my opening lines when I would perform in shows and the audience always applauded it.

Paaji had shifted to Chandigarh, and finally he was very proud of his prodigal son. An entire wall was covered with my clippings and photos. My daughters would say, 'He has only your photos on the wall. Are you sure your siblings don't mind? After all, you are not his only child.' I don't think they did. Everyone was happy in his happiness. He would order me to send him at least a hundred autographed photos at times. Anyone who came to visit him would be given my photo. He would ask them, 'Do you know him? He acted in *Upkaar* and *Do Raaste*.' The visitors would reply, 'Yes Paaji, we do know him.' He would proceed to bring out some more press clippings that he had carefully preserved and show them to his guests. They indulged him politely. Whenever I went to Chandigarh he would introduce me to his friends and ask them in my presence, 'Do you recognize him? He is an actor… he has appeared in so-and-so film.' They would tell him, that of course, they knew me. He had finally made the transition from a cautious father to a proud father.

Once I had gone for a walk with my father in the Pinjore Gardens at Panchkula. There were some people who were walking in our general direction and when they saw me, they started shouting, 'Hide your wives, Prem Chopra is here!'

My father was aghast and said, 'I thought you had become popular, but people are scared of you!' I requested my father to call out to them. I met them and convinced them that I was a 'nice' guy.

My wife's niece's son, Nikhil Nanda, came over to our house as a child once when his eyes fell on my shoes and he yelled, '*Prem Chopra ke joote*' (Prem Chopra's shoes.)' He ran out of the house, quaking with fear, and without waiting for the lift, ran down fourteen floors to his car. He refused to budge from there, however hard my family tried to convince him that I had gone for a shoot and was not at home. He just refused to come up again. It remains a family joke to date.

Around this time, a group of students from Pune conducted a survey and found that Prem Chopra was the most hated villain, which could be construed that I was actually the best villain. Prem! What a name for someone who practised anything but love on-screen! I have faced a number of embarrassing situations, all because I epitomize the villain. Whether it was Nikhil or those people in Chandigarh, every incident brought home the realization that people were scared of me and hated me.

An anecdote involving the great actor, Sir Laurence Olivier, comes to mind. He was to play a negative role and from the time he agreed to it, he set about getting under the skin of the character. The curtain went up and there he was—the villain—not Sir Laurence Olivier any more. His performance riveted people to their seats. The tension in the hall was so thick that one could cut it with a knife. Finally, an old woman couldn't stand it any longer and flung her shoe at him before the curtain came down. The woman was in trouble; the crowd too looked restive, but within minutes the curtain went up again and Sir Laurence was back on stage with the shoe in his hand. He commended the woman, saying that her shoe was his best award; he would treasure it as proof that he had lived his role.

I have experienced similar feeling of creative satisfaction when people have hated me or

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cursed me for what I was on screen. Off-screen I am a well-mannered, well-read man who loves his family and his work.

Yet an artiste cannot go on doing the same things again and again. It is these parrot-like performances that are sickening, monotonous and stagnating. It is natural then to lose one's enthusiasm for work. It had happened with many artistes and I didn't want it to happen to me. I needed variety to prove my worth, to put my talent to use, and that is exactly why I was constantly looking for new things, new roles.

Even though the special appearance in *Bobby* was much celebrated, it planted an idea in the minds of filmmakers. Suddenly everyone wanted me to make special appearances, but I was not interested.

Then there was the time I hated myself. One of my close relatives had died; naturally a sad and serious occasion for the whole family. At the funeral procession, a few young men decided to have some fun. One of them shouted, 'I am Prem Chopra', while the rest laughed loudly. I don't know if I was more irritated or embarrassed; but this tamasha at such a solemn occasion made me hate myself for being a film star.

I have worked with almost every hero over the past few decades. It is surprising that people, who joined the industry around the same time as me and fared so well, disappeared into oblivion somewhere down the line.

In the beginning, I used to be sorry that I had missed the chance to become a hero. But now, on reflection, I know that had I become one, I may not have made it this far; perhaps it was a blessing in disguise.

One of the most difficult adjustments to be made is when one has to work with inferior actors who seem to be doing better than you in status and financially. Maybe that is what experience and life teaches you—to stay focused, to remain dedicated.

I was keen to do positive roles when *Jadu Tona* came my way. It was an interesting role—I played the father of a girl who is possessed by a mysterious entity. I was appreciated, and friends and collegues who saw the film in the trial show said, 'Gates for positive roles will open after this film.' Critics also wrote favourably about my performance. However, the film flopped and all the positive reviews ceased to matter.

However much we may crave for change in this industry, it is ultimately the audience who determine our fate. Once again I was in a fix. I wanted to play a good man, but the bad man refused to leave me. I had experienced too much hatred for the characters I had played. Though part of me accepted it as indirect adulation, I wanted those women and children who feared me to see me as a different person. I knew it was difficult, but I was going to keep trying, and I knew that I would succeed one day.

Yet, life has given me some very special moments. One incident cherished by me was when I was shooting in Simla for *Do Jhoot*. One evening, after a long and tiring shoot, we were all relaxing in our hotel after dinner. Uma and Rakita were both with me. It was cold outside. Suddenly the manager burst in upon me,

'Mr Chopra, hordes of fans are waiting outside to see you.'

'How long have they been waiting?'

'It's been over two hours.'

I completely lost my temper as I fired the manager for not informing me earlier and rushed out immediately to meet my fans. This was the same Clarks Hotel where I had stood twenty years ago, waiting to catch a glimpse of the actors.

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Typecasting the Villain

It was in the November 1981 issue of *Filmfare* that a reader asked, 'Just for a change, wouldn't you like to see a multi starrer in which Amitabh Bachchan plays a timid dumb man, Rajesh Khanna an angry young man, Rishi Kapoor a villain, Hema Malini a dark ugly girl, Zeenat Aman a typical bharatiya naari, Smita Patil a cabaret dancer, Prem Chopra a good-hearted person and Keshto Mukherjee a teetotaler?'

Whether a formula or a role—a hit's characters are promptly typecast.

In a scene in *Ek Aur Ek Gyarah* (1981), the heroes are about to be crushed by a road-roller let loose by me. In another shot, you see the heroes playing what looks like a game of soccer with me being substituted for the ball. This game has the heroes emerging with no bruises, while I have minor bruises and the viewer is left completely bruised!

On Valentine's Day in 1982, a morning paper commented, 'Although villains are cruel in nature, yet they too have feelings of romance and carry on their love scenes behind bushes and on snow-clad hill stations. The hero and heroine are shown with families, but the villain is projected as an "I am alone in this world" character. He too should be shown having his own blood relatives, but our directors prefer to drag him right from the sky to the concerned film. The villain is deprived of the privilege of singing. How about having a Prem Chopra–Kalpana Iyer or a Prem Chopra–Bindu pairing, singing a pure love song?'

Most of our screen villains equip their dens with crazy gadgets for torturing heroes and their friends. They never seem to recognize the hero and heroine dancing in front of them in disguise while they do an item number in front of him during the pre-climax. No wonder our screen villains provide better comedy than the so-called comedians!

Villainy changed over time. The villains in the 1940s and '50s did not have to rape or molest womenfolk, nor did they have to engage in bloody fights. They were supposed to act in vicious and fiendish ways—like eavesdropping, spying, hoodwinking, checkmating their adversaries and in most cases acting like the proverbial fly in the romantic ointment.

A villain generally has a short reel life. He who is not able to rise above the limited level of his personal image fades out soon, unless he plays the character; it is only then that he lives for a longer time. Ultimately, only the actor stays.

I used to work on the get-up. Of course I saw to it that it wasn't too fancy or distracting, but it had to be distinctive. Next, I controlled my speech and gait—a lot went into it.

Amitabh Bachchan wasn't a spotlessly clean hero in his films. He was tough and at times got on the wrong side of the law; similarly, the official villain had motivations too. I played a preoccupied tycoon in *Kaala Patthar* (1979)—my disregard for the coal miners' welfare wasn't so much villainy as apathy. In the film I tell Amitabh, 'I don't have the time to think about things like workers' safety. Accidents aren't likely to occur, and besides, I've other things on my mind.' The character wasn't a mindless villain, he was just too involved with his numerous ventures to really care—that's a true-to-life bad guy, isn't it?

The main ingredients of a villain are his intelligent personality, the movement of the eyes, highly

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modulative dialogue delivery, well-timed curling of the tips and finally, right usage of hands and feet. Let me make it clear, no clichés should be used whilst performing. All actions should be commanded by the script and one's movements need to be spontaneous.

While playing the villain, I gave equal preference to serious acting as well as comedy. I had a serious role in *Keemat* while I played a comic villain in *Raja Jani*. I studied my roles with the same diligence, if not more, than my co-starring heroes. Villainy forms the pivot on which the pattern of the story rests. The importance of villainy will not diminish as long as it is an inherent part of human nature. Interest automatically picks up when antagonists enter the scene.

Shrieking in the case of vamps, shouting in the case of villains and mannerisms put on for the sake of melodrama—all these are essential if villainy has to rub shoulders with heroism in a film. In many cases, the villain's role helps to heighten the hero's appeal.

Starting with the silent era and carrying into the 1960s and '70s, our films had the good man, smiling and civilized, and the bad man with loud clothes and mannerisms, and his felt hat and cigar. If an actor can avoid getting typecast, he can have a much longer span of life and that is why artistes always like to play a variety of roles.

What helped my career was the attitude of newcomers, each of whom wanted to be nothing but the hero. So, as the bad man on screen, no other villain had it so good.

I soon realized the importance of the villain in films—the dark force that deems a movie spellbinding. Take away the villain and what you have are the hero and heroine singing love duets. There is no drama, no tension. The moment I enter the scene, things start happening. In the beginning, people, including some heroes, used to smile cynically when I would tell an interviewer that the film revolves around me. Soon, everyone came to see its importance. The hero's image depended on the presence of my character to provide the necessary contrast.

Writers and filmmakers soon realized that in real life there are no clear-cut categories of black and white as far as people are concerned. No one is purely bad or good. Grey is the natural order of any personality, a mixture of black and white, good and bad. It has resulted in the highly successful emergence of the anti-hero image, a bad person who strives to be good. And the public's response to this new trend bodes well for villains; we too may live in hope of some powerful roles.

Suddenly I was getting a variety of roles. In *Sanyasi* I had dramatic moments relieved by humour and fun; in *Bairaag* I played a prince frustrated by the lack of love and wealth; in *Papi Devta* I played a character role as the brother of the heroine (it gave me an emotional and sentimental edge); in *Raaja* (1975) I was a stylish villain, a plotter, not a fighter; and in *Maha Chor* (1976) I was a scheming intellectual.

An observation was made by *Star & Style*, a leading magazine, in the early '80s: 'The village is all good and pure—the people are devatas of virtue while the cities are ugly, polluted and full of prostitutes and pimps. I mean, in Hindi movies, Dharam, Manoj, Rajesh, Hema, Moushumi, Rekha are all the village innocents while Prem Chopra and Bindu are the city folks.'

Bindu recalls

We were supposed to do *Teen Titliyaan* in the early '60s. He was to play the hero and I was the heroine. It was being made by P.L. Santoshi, father of Rajkumar Santoshi. However, that film never got made. Later, we signed up for *Do Raaste* as man and wife and it did very well. Consequently, all producers and directors wanted us as a pair in their films. We went on to do several films like *Kati*

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Patang, Nafrat, Raja Jani, Prem Nagar, Des Pardes, Phandebaaz, Aasoo Bane Angaarey (1993), *Gehri Chaal, Phool Bane Angarey* (1991), *Chhupa Rustam* (1973) and *Dastaan*.

Prem-ji is a nice gentleman, very loving, very down to earth and [with] a superb sense of humour. Even today we have a very good rapport. We did several movies together, but Uma never doubted us. She is a very good person and a big support to him. Everyone likes him in the industry. When we would go on outdoor shoots, the unit would be different, but very often the same actors came together and he would care for us, always making sure that we were comfortable. I remember an incident—we were travelling from Bangalore to Mysore and had stopped for a meal in a South Indian restaurant. There was a big hero with us but when the time came to settle the bill, only Prem-ji's hand went to his pocket. He is truly a big-hearted person.

Films with Bindu

Do Raaste (1969), *Doli* (1969), *Kati Patang* (1970), *Lagan* (1971), *Raja Jani* (1972), *Dastaan* (1972), *Nafrat* (1973), *Chhupa Rustam* (1973), *Gehri Chaal* (1973), *Prem Nagar* (1974), *Tyaag* (1976), *Chala Murari Hero Banne* (1977), *Des Pardes* (1978), *Phandebaaz* (1978), *Naseeb* (1981), *Bandhan Kachchey Dhaagonka* (1983), *Haqeeqat* (1985), *Saveraywali Gaadi* (1986), *Kalyug Aur Ramayan* (1987), *Phool Bane Angaray* (1991), *Aasoo Bane Angaarey* (1993), *Gopaala* (1994), *Jai Hind* (1999)

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Often friendships begin at work—a polite nod moving on to a casual acquaintance before ties are forged that last several decades, especially when you have common interests. A lot of my professional associations too moved on to become lasting personal friendships.

In an interview with a film magazine, Jeetendra was asked about his long-standing friendships with his colleagues, especially Rishi Kapoor, Rakesh Roshan, Sujit Kumar and me. (We and our wives are perceived as a close-knit group, almost like a family.) 'I don't know why most film people say that they don't like having friends within the industry,' replied Jeetendra, totally perplexed. 'I love films and I love to talk about films. I can't talk about the steel industry, I am no expert about the silk industry, I don't know the sugar industry, or the cotton industry. I can only talk about the film industry and I love having friends from the industry.'

★

Jeetendra on Prem Chopra

He was a very handsome man—more like a hero than a villain. However, he chose to be practical and accepted the offers that came his way and mould himself accordingly. He is a man of unparalleled strength; it takes courage to change course when your heart is set on something. It is a lesson worth learning. I cherish his friendship; he is one of the finest friends I have. We share our joys and sorrows and problems that we cannot take elsewhere. I was the hero in *Mawaali* (1983) while Prem played the heroine's father. I ragged him all the time. *Voh hamara chalta rehta tha*. [That was our thing.] To his credit, even though I may have crossed the line sometimes, he never lost his cool, never hit below the belt. He is special—his ability to laugh at himself, his patience and tolerance are rare attributes.

I still look forward to evenings at the health club in the Sun-n-Sand Hotel. It is fun to work out at the gym with buddies. In the last few years, it has been more about spending time with old friends like Guddu (Rakesh Roshan) and Prem.

★

Prem Chopra on Jeetendra

Our friendship dated back to the days [when] we lived in the same building at Colaba; our struggles and desires were common. I was working for *The Times of India* and Jeetu used to sell his uncle's jewellery to the film industry. Though I considered myself the intellectual, Jeetu insisted on introducing me as a hawker for *TOI* because I looked after their sales! Later in the '70s, when we

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were both neighbours in Pali Hill, our friendship became stronger. We shared tremendous rapport and Jeetu was one of my closest friends. Nothing has changed today. We still discuss matters of importance and value each other's opinions, and we drop into each other's homes with the ease of old friends.

Jeetu started his career as a hero in a V. Shantaram film but unlike other Shantaram heroes, he moved on to become successful commercially. Jeetu is a fine actor and has given some stellar performances under good directors. If he repeated the *Himmatwala* type of roles it was because they clicked. One cannot continue indefinitely if one's films fail.

A journalist once asked me if Jeetu had helped my career by recommending me to his producers (we were doing a lot of films together in those days). I responded, 'It's not true. Why should he have to help me? Truly, nobody can help anyone's career because it is only merit that counts. Nobody wants an indifferent performer, even on a recommendation.'

Jeetendra's response to this was, 'I never recommended him. His own stature and confidence commanded respect. When a big star tried to belittle him, Prem put him in place firmly, keeping his own dignity intact. I have never recommended him; he is too self-respecting to have tolerated it. He would have stepped aside rather than worked on the basis of recommendations.'

★

We were shooting a fight sequence for *Dildaar* (1977) when Jeetendra received the news of his son Tusshar's birth. We packed up and came back to celebrate. We have shared so many important events of each other's lives.

Kasam Khoon Ki (1977) and *Dil Aur Deewaar* (1978) were a few other films we did together, co-starring Rakesh Roshan (Guddu), another close friend. We were on location in Ooty and stayed at the Fernhill Hotel. We shared excellent vibes and took great pleasure in playing pranks on each other. One particular incident comes to mind. It was almost midnight by the time we had packed up that evening. I felt I had barely slept when I received a wake-up call and my bed tea came in. I dressed and went to the reception, ready for the day's shoot before I realized that it was only 2.30 a.m. It was then that I realized that I had been set up by my friends.

I have always told Guddu that he's a better director than an actor. There was a time when he wasn't being offered great scripts—the roles were completely run-of-the-mill. That's when he chose to move into direction and production. His true talents were untapped; and look where he is today.

★

Rakesh Roshan on Prem Chopra

I was standing on the road when I saw him on a bus the first time. I remember thinking, What a handsome man. Then I met him on the sets of *Anjaana*. I was the assistant director while he was the main negative character in the movie. He was naturally friendly and I noticed that the atmosphere on the sets would change in his presence; he managed to infuse everyone with his infectious spirit. Apart from being a good actor, he is that rare human being who encourages everyone.

Later, we become great friends and no party since then is complete without him, though he is

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not an attention seeker. He stands by to hear what the other person has to say; he has the extraordinary gift of patience.

An incident that occurred when we stayed at Fernhill Hotel during the shooting of *Dil Aur Deewar*. We were pretty much by ourselves as the unit was to join us a day later. It was a dark and rainy night and the main hotel was almost empty. Prem suggested, 'Lets go to the annexe, it might be better there.' We spent some time relaxing and came to the main hotel for dinner. A thought came to me and I said, 'What if we go back to the annexe and find the chandelier of the room broken?' Prem replied abruptly, 'What rubbish! Keep all these thoughts to yourself.' We went back to find that my words had actually come true! The chandelier was broken and the pieces were lying all over the bed. We were frightened out of our wits; it was straight out of a horror movie. We ran back to the main hotel and stayed in the same room that night.

★

Another regular in our group of friends was Chintu (Rishi Kapoor). After *Bobby*, we appeared in two movies in quick succession; one was *Barood* (1976), directed by Pramod Chakravorty. We shot in Tignes in the south of France for *Barood,* where skiing is popular all through the year. Though I used to ski in Simla, I did not get a chance in Tignes with the busy shooting schedules. The other film was *Raaja,* which flopped. Whenever Chintu and I meet, we reminisce about all the hit pictures we did together and he always reminds me of our 'outstanding' (our mutual code for bogus) picture *Raaja*. He has always been a pleasant guy to work with.

In those days, when mobile phones were still a thing of the future, Chintu and I would call each other quite often on the landline. We used to play a little game—while receiving or making a call, we adopted the names of current newsmakers. For instance, when Saddam Hussein was in the news, I called Chintu's home and said, '*Chintu ko bolo, Saddam Hussein ka phone hai*. (Tell Chintu that Saddam Husssain is on the phone).' The help at Chintu's place actually believed me and went running to tell Chintu saab.

Chintu, not to be outdone, called my place and introduced himself to my daughter as Fidel Castro. In her haste to tell me, she forgot the name and turned back to ask him once more. I overheard her trying to repeat the unfamiliar name and guessed it to be Chintu. I took the phone from her, and in a loud and booming voice said, 'I am Ayatollah Khomeini, what do you want, Fidel?' This repartee continues even today.

When dining together, I would yell out to the waiter, 'Hey Chintu!' And Chintu in turn would yell out to another waiter, 'Hey Prem!'

Chintu and I did films like *Jhoota Kahin Ka* (1979) and *Dhan Daulat* (1980), the former a typical '70s movie about two brothers (Rishi Kapoor and Rakesh Roshan) separated at birth. They grow up and have a fallout with each other, not knowing they are related; one of them falls in love (Rishi with Neetu Singh); finally the brothers recognize each other and nab the villain (me). It was the story for 80 per cent of the films in that era. Neetu and Chintu were dating at the time.

Once Chintu, Jeetu and I went to Dubai for a show. We met some air hostesses from a UAE airline and struck up a conversation. When they asked us what we did, I replied, 'We are actors. I am considered the Marlon Brando of Bollywood.' Chintu, not to be outdone, said, 'I am the Dustin Hoffman of India.' Jeetu and I looked at him and went on to have a good laugh.

On the same trip, we were all presented with gold watches. All of us were drinking on the

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flight home and consequently our gait was a bit unsteady as we walked towards the customs in Bombay. The official on duty eyed Chintu's watch and promptly confiscated it, on being told that he had received it as a gift. Chintu, in his inebriated state, questioned, 'What about these two? They also have similar watches.' And so went our watches too. We haven't forgiven Chintu yet; we still rag him periodically.

During the summer months films would be shot in locations like Kashmir and Ooty. Our families, too, would go along. I think all the star kids of the '70s and '80s have made at least one trip to Ooty and Kashmir. The shoots were always around May when the children had holidays and dates were easily available to the producers. Uma and I always paid for our kids; we never passed any expenses on to the producer.

Invariably, there would be other friends at the same location. So it would end up as a friends and family group holiday. Once we landed in Kashmir to find the suitcase with our children's clothes missing. Rakesh Roshan and his family happened to be in Kashmir too. The kids were roughly the same age. So Pinky (Rakesh Roshan's wife), shared some of Sunaina and Hrithik's clothes with our children before Uma and I managed to buy some stuff the next day.

We always celebrated New Year with our families. Sometimes it would be at Guddu's place, though it was mostly at Sujit Kumar's bungalow. Even today, though all the kids are busy in their own lives and have gone their separate ways, when they meet, it is with the bonhomie of their childhood.

Another person that I have great regard for is Manoj Kumar. He played the most important role in making me an on-screen baddie. Though I had done some small roles as the villain earlier, it was Manoj Kumar who actually saw the antagonist in me. He gave me the first major break in *Upkar*, his first film as a director. I took up the challenge and played the role he had created for me with my whole heart and the result was unbelievable. *Upkar* was a milestone in the history of Hindi films. Pran saab, who had been playing the villain for several decades, turned a new leaf to play the good man while I was brought in as the new bad man. Manoj Kumar cast me in all the films he directed and gave me a chance to prove myself as a villain—and the audience hated me, which was ironically the proof of my popularity and success. There were other directors like Yash Chopra who gave me the scope to grow as well. And then there were all the Hindi films made by directors from the South. Though all of them had a part to play in my growth as an actor, whenever I look back, I know that it was Manoj Kumar who really showed me the way to reach for the stars. He defined me as an actor.

Manoj Kumar gave me some of my best-etched roles, like the ones in *Kranti* and *Purab Aur Pachhim*. He always made films on subjects he was convinced about. I respected his hard work. He taught me that the more successful you are, the harder you have to work to sustain it. It is a glorious association of almost sixty years now. Recently, we went to Goa with our wives for a long weekend. It is truly a cause for joy when one can spend time with people not related by blood but by spirit.

Besides these friends from the industry who have stood the test of time, I have other close friends like Ali Khan, Vijay Malhotra, Dr Anil Sharma, Avinash Aggarwal and Gulshan Arora. Our friendship goes back several decades.

Today, I have friends from every age group. I can chat with a youngster or a peer with the same ease; age is no criteria, it is only a frame of mind.

Nowadays, Salim Khan and I end up meeting every week. We watch movies at Ketnav (a preview theatre) together. Theirs is a very charitable family.

He is an intelligent conversationalist, very jovial, with a tremendous ability to recount incidents. I remember an occasion when both of us were present for a book release. The speeches were serious, as the topic under discussion was Mahatma Gandhi. When Salim went on stage, he

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started by saying that he had received a phone call asking if Salman could attend the function. When he informed the caller that Salman was busy, he was asked if Arbaaz was available. The same answer was given. Next, the indefatigable organizer asked about Sohail before moving on to Helen. All were busy. Finally, they asked Salim if he could grace the occasion. When Salim assented, the organizer performed a volte-face to say that the invitation was actually for Salim Khan. Salim narrated this anecdote in such a fashion that I could not control my laughter. I think I laughed the loudest, so much so that everybody turned to look at me. After he got off the stage, I hugged Salim and complimented him, 'Well said!'

★

1978
New Year's Eve

Our gang of five (Rakesh Roshan, Sujit Kumar, Jeetendra, Vinod Mehra and me) threw a party at the Airport Centaur Hotel. Soon the party was swinging and everyone was in high spirits. It was way past midnight. Most people looked tired and started sitting down, with the exception of Sujit Kumar and me. We continued to dance with gusto. Everyone was enjoying our performance and cheering us. We were ecstatic and managed to infuse extra rhythm into our steps. I guess we villains do not get to dance as much as we wanted to on screen, so an opportunity like this was welcome and nothing was going to stop us.

Films with Jeetendra
Waris (1969), *Himmat* (1970), *Jawab* (1970), *Gehri Chaal* (1973), *Kasam Khoon Ki* (1977), *Dildaar* (1977), *Dil aur Deewar* (1978), *Nishana* (1980), *Raksha* (1981), *Shakka* (1981), *Farz aur Kanoon* (1982), *Prem Tapasya* (1983), *Mawaali* (1983), *Maqsad* (1984), *Bond 303* (1985), *Haqeeqat* (1985), *Swarg se Sunder* (1986), *Sindoor* (1987), *Insaaf Ki Pukaar* (1987), *Santaan* (1993), *Aansoon bane Angaarey* (1993)

Films with Rakesh Roshan
Nafrat (1973), *Jhoota Kahin Ka* (1979), *Haathkadi* (1982) *Khel* (1992), *Koi… Mil Gaya* (2003)

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The Transition to the Angry Young Man Era

1979
Film: *Kaala Patthar*

The engineer (Shashi Kapoor) informs the boss (Prem Chopra) that there are four hundred workers in the mines and it is dangerous to work under a certain level. However, if the mines are evacuated, they could lose forty lakh rupees. How does Prem Chopra respond? PC: '*Saxena, tumhara hisaab itna kamzor hai ki tum yeh bhi nahin jante chalis lakh, char sau se bahut zyada hote hain* (Saxena, your maths is so weak that you don't even know that forty lakh is a much bigger number than 400).'

Later on, his karma catches up with him when his engineer informs him that the mines are flooded with water and the four hundred workers are trapped. The expected Prem Chopra reaction:

PC: 'Oh my god! *Iska matlab hai hamara lakhon ton koyla paani mein chukh jayega. Dekho, koi bhi reporter pooche toh usey keh dena ki mine mein tees–chalis workers se zyaada nahin the* (That means our coal worth lakhs will be destroyed in the water. Look, if any reporter asks, tell him that there were only thirty–forty workers in the mine).'

Amitabh Bachchan, the eternal Vijay and the hero, enters. PC calls out for help.

The hero responds, '*Aaj koi nahin hai jo tujhe mujhse bacha sake kameene! Yaad hai maine tujhse kaha tha ke agar ek bhi mazdoor mar gaya toh mein tujhe nahin chhodoonga* (No one can save you from me today. Remember, I had told you, even if one worker dies I won't spare you).'

AB beats up PC before delivering another clap-worthy dialogue, '*Kutte, mulk ka kanoon tera intezaar kar raha hai* (You dog, the police is waiting to lock you up).'

I often wondered how my children felt seeing me play a bad man and getting beaten up on screen by Amitabh Bachchan. While million of fans adored him, do you think my kids ever liked him? My kids were constantly told that Papa just *plays* the bad man. This had to be understood; it was a job that resulted in a good education for them. So they shouldn't believe what they see on the screen.

Pyar Ki Kahani (1971) was one of my earlier films with Amitabh Bachchan. I had already seen him in *Parwana* (1971), having been invited for a trial at Rajendra Kumar's Dimple preview theatre by Navin Nischol. Navin and I lived in the same building and were friends. The film was passable, but I stopped to ask him who the tall boy in a negative role was. He had caught my attention and I remember telling Navin that he would create history. I was told that he was a poet's son.

Soon after, Amitabh and I did *Pyar Ki Kahani*. We were also in another film together, *Raaste Kaa Patthar* (1972). The story was about Jai Shankar Rai (Amitabh Bachchan) who allows his superiors, as well as his boss Ranjeet Choudhary, the use of his flat at night to have their flings with women. There is also a track about a girl whom Amitabh falls in love with, only to discover that she is one of the women who visited his flat. This angle was used in *Life in a...Metro* (2007), with my son-in-law Sharman Joshi playing a similar part, coincidentally.

I remember finding Amitabh respectful and cultured. He had a good educational background

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and it showed in his conduct. We got along well.

Amitabh never bragged about himself. But yes, he was confident from the word go. During the making of *Gehri Chaal*, he was going through a bad patch. Sridhar, a filmmaker from the South, turned up for a meeting and said, 'If this film doesn't work, I will be out of business.'

Amitabh looked at him and said, 'I've been doing second, third and fourth leads in films for a while. I'm going through a rough patch. But I know I'll bounce back. I will occupy the top slot and stay there.'

He made it big. And it was sheer confidence, not overconfidence that catapulted him to where he is today, an artiste who braved and survived the winds of change.

Benaam (1974) was another film we starred in; it was a thriller. I had a well-defined role. In order to retain the suspense, Kader Khan's voice was used for the blackmailing phone calls I made in the film.

Daag was released around this time—a huge success—and Yash Chopra immediately repeated me in *Kala Patthar* and *Trishul* (1978). Both were super hits. He also offered me a role in his blockbuster movie *Deewar* (1975), but I was reluctant as the role he had in mind for me was not significant. To his credit, he understood my reservation.

The transition from the Rajesh Khanna era to the Amitabh Bachchan angry young man era was smooth. I would go for a shoot, mind my own business and get back home. I enjoyed socializing and that was it. I never crossed a line. I was an actor first and last; never part of an exclusive camp.

It was during this time that I felt that the portrayal of the villain's character on screen needed a makeover. And as though the scriptwriters had read my mind, I got an opportunity to play one of the best roles of my career in *Do Anjaane* (1976). Dulal Guha's able direction helped the character develop further. It was a trendsetter, and scriptwriters and directors scrambled to revamp the villain's image. The bad man had now achieved a certain status, an inherent sophistication.

Incidentally, I was nominated for the Best Supporting Actor by Filmfare in 1976 for two films, *Mehbooba* (1976) and *Do Anjaane*. I won my first Filmfare Award for *Do Anjaane*. Dulal Guha, who operated the camera himself, believed in giving a well-defined introduction as well as a close to each character. The original choice for my role had been Kabir Bedi—I was the second choice. However, after this movie I was often part of Dulal Guha's movies. We shot 70 per cent of the film in Calcutta and stayed at the Oberoi Hotel. The producer was Tito Singh and it was a fun schedule.

I have always been partial to roles with different shades. *Do Anjaane* was no different. I play the rich foreign-returned friend of the hero who eyed the hero's wife. In the latter half of the movie, after a seven-to-eight-year time lapse, I am shown as the loser who has lost all his wealth in establishing the heroine as a movie star and ended up almost like her secretary. The suave confidence of the first half is missing in the second where I am shown as a bickering, nagging man. In the first half, my get-up in terms of clothes, accessories and the way I wear my hair is flashy, while in the second, I dress simply and have thinning hair. Compared to the hero of the film who had clap-worthy dialogues, I had recourse only to gestures and subtle nuances.

I did not expect the award. I was in Holland for *The Great Gambler* (1979) and getting ready for the day's shoot when Shakti Samanta, accompanied by two or three people, came to my room. I was just not getting a moustache right and I looked up at Shaktida and apologized for the delay. They smiled as they gave me the good news that I had just won the Filmfare. I did not believe it; I thought they were joking. I was so used to being nominated and not getting the award that I had stopped thinking of it. Amitabh Bachchan was expecting the award for *Kabhi Kabhie* (1976) that year, but he did not get it. Sanjeev Kumar got it instead for *Arjun Pandit* (1976). I was conscious of that too. That

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day we had a party and we all celebrated.

A reviewer for *Screen* wrote, 'I cannot say what hidden reserves of acting talent Amitabh Bachchan still has in him and I am not quite sure that "villain" Prem Chopra is still not looking for the best role of his career. So far as I am concerned, I think I have seen them both at their best in *Do Anjaane*, directed by Dulal Guha. The man this film ought to do most good to is Prem Chopra, whose polished, suave villainy and poisonousness *Do Anjaane* has brought out as no other film has so far. If I were either Amitabh or Prem Chopra and asked to name the best role of my career I would unhesitatingly say: *Do Anjaane*.'

By this time Amitabh Bachchan was the undisputed king of the decade. The declaration of emergency between 1975 and 1977 in India had angered the masses and this helped films having the lead character revolting against corruption or the angry young man in becoming successful.

Amitabh and I went on to do a lot of films together in his angry young man phase in the '70s. Some of them were *Gehri Chaal, Benaam, Do Anjaane, Trishul, The Great Gambler, Immaan Dharam* (1977) and *Kaala Patthar*. In the '80s we did *Ram Balram, Dostana* (1980), *Naseeb* (1981), *Desh Premee* (1982), *Khud-daar* (1982), *Pukar* (1983), *Mard* (1985), *Andhaa Kanoon* (1983), and *Shshenshah* (1988). Most of these films did well.

In almost all the films, I was beaten up by him in the end. I must mention that Amitabh was an exception, otherwise it was very embarrassing to be beaten up by a five-foot-something hero. It may sound incredible, but in Hindi films it is a routine occurrence. Amitabh and I had had a lot of fun together. When I had to bash him up, I would solicitously enquire after every shot if he was hurt. Perplexed, he finally asked me, 'Why are you so concerned?' I replied, 'Because when it is my turn to be clobbered, I want you to be similarly concerned!'

Trishul, my second movie with Yash Chopra, was produced by Gulshan Rai. It was a resounding success and one of the top grossers of 1978. It was remade in Tamil as *Mr. Bharath* (1986), starring Rajnikanth. I found Yash to be a meticulous director. He believed in assembling a complete script before the film went on sets. Though he was an involved filmmaker, he was fairly easy going on the set. Since there were no underlying tensions, a carefree atmosphere prevailed. He was happy with my character and performance. After this movie, a lot of people commented that I would be flooded with character roles. I was very happy with the range of my performance.

During *Trishul*, Shashi Kapoor, Amitabh and I were drinking at the Oberoi. Those days Amitabh enjoyed drinking. After three drinks, he started playing the sitar and we lost count of time. Finally one of us threw back the curtains and realized to our shock that it was almost dawn. Shashi and I decided to go back to our rooms. I was so drunk by now that I was supporting myself against the wall as I walked up to my room. The joke that made the rounds later was that if anyone had opened a door before I reached my room, I would have walked straight in and tumbled into bed in that room.

That morning we were on time for the shoot. Yash was very happy and said, 'See how punctual my boys are—they are here on the dot at 7.' We had a hearty laugh because all of us were actually dropping off to sleep.

The fact that I was working in films written by Salim–Javed or Manmohan Desai, Yash Chopra or Manoj Kumar, reflects the fact that I was not part of any one camp.

Kala Patthar was inspired by the Chasnala mining disaster. I played the cold and calculating industrial tycoon Seth Dhanraj who makes life difficult for the coal miners. The press dropped by, and engaged in a discussion with Amitabh Bachchan and Shatrughan Sinha, trying to gauge who had a better role. Finally I said, 'I am the owner and these two guys along with Shashi Kapoor are playing my employees, and they obey my orders.' The situation was diffused as everyone had a good laugh.

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Another paper, *Free Press Journal*, said,

> Another [very] impressive [performance] comes from Prem Chopra as the ruthless capitalist. The suppressed manner in which he conveys the rich man's anger and his undisputed sophistication strikes [you] as one of the best performances by the actor. There is this particular scene when he refuses to pay bonus to his workers and is furious with Shashi who speaks for the workers waiting outside the owner's bungalow. Prem goes out, addresses the workers telling them they would not get anything out of him. Next, he rushes in and declares he would pay the workers. The actor is certainly at his best here.

Recounting the scenes from *Kaala Patthar*, Amitabh Bachchan said about me in an interview to *Film Mirror* in 1985, 'shots involving him as a co-artist are most taxing, for his screen presence is so overwhelming that all the time you are anxious not to give in to him.'

After the premiere of *Kaala Patthar*, Javed called to compliment me at length on my performance. My desire is not to highlight Javed Akhtar or Amitabh Bachchan's compliments, merely to draw attention to how such appreciation acts like an elixir for an actor, however successful he may be. You just feel that you are doing it right.

Immaan Dharam was produced by Prem-ji while the director was Desh Mukherjee (earlier an art director). It was written by Salim–Javed. Salim–Javed had liked me in *Immaan Dharam*. They felt I had played the role exactly the way they had conceived and done complete justice to the character. I played Ranjeet. This name seemed to stick to me in a lot of films. Prem-ji was a relative, but that was not the reason I was cast in the film. You take on an actor only when the collective team of writers, producer and director consider him or her capable of delivering the goods. The stakes are too high.

The Great Gambler, directed by Shakti Samanta, was shot in Cairo, Europe and Lisbon. It was the first film to be shot in these places. While we were shooting for the film in Italy, Amitabh would watch his rushes over and over again, constantly seeking self-improvement. In fact, Amitabh got the news that Jaya was expecting their second child when we were shooting in Lisbon. He was ecstatic.

Amitabh has a tremendous sense of humour. He's a private person, but he opens up to reveal a wonderful personality.

Another interesting habit of Amitabh during that time was his daily diary to his daughter whenever he happened to be on an outdoor shoot. Perhaps it was a chronicling of his entire day. It is possible that he may have been inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru's *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*, addressed to Indira Gandhi. Amitabh's habit was put to good use later when he started his own blog.

The eighties with Amitabh

1980

Dostana was produced by Yash Johar and directed by Raj Khosla. Yash Johar was a wonderful and caring producer. It was after a trial screening that Raj Khosla said, 'You have certainly evolved between *Woh Kaun Thi* and *Dostana*.'

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The three universal reasons for conflict in the world are wine, women and wealth. In every film, I stirred up the conflict, either because I wanted the heroine or wealth and more wealth. This movie was no different. My character Daaga pits the two best friends, Amitabh Bachchan and Shatrughan Sinha, against each other by creating a misunderstanding over a girl both loved. We shot the climax in London.

In one scene my henchmen tie up Amitabh Bachchan and Shatrughan Sinha. In order to extract information, I had to hit them with a dummy hunter. Amitabh Bachchan kept on saying, 'Hit me hard.' I complied and asked him, 'Are you okay?' to which he replied, 'Yes'. I was careful, conscious that he would be wielding the hunter later. I had to be good to him and ensure his goodwill.

Amitabh was always very refined. I had scheduled a trial screening of *Dostana* and Amit wanted to show the rushes to his parents who were in town. When I was delayed because of a dubbing engagement that I had to wrap up, he came up to me and apologized for 'barging in', saying it was my trial after all.

An Amitabh regular, Manmohan Desai, the man with the Midas touch, saw me delivering a speech at a function and called me. He told me that he had been much taken by my speech the day before and decided to offer me *Naseeb*.

As a maker, he had his own style. He was a trendsetter. At night he would keep a writing pad and a ball pen next to his bedside. The film would occupy his thoughts and whenever a new idea came to mind, he would get up to jot it down. By the time we arrived at the sets the scene could have changed. In those days the scripts were not bound like they are today. Yet the films were jubilee hits. This film was a big hit too and set the trend for multi-starrer song sequences like 'John, Janni, Janardan'. Almost the entire industry was part of that song.

The film was an all-time earner, one of those rare movies of the time, which crossed one crore rupees per territory. There were only thirteen all-time earners till 1984 and *Naseeb* was among them.

Soon after, Manmohan Desai signed me for *Mard*. The movie was shot in Bangalore. I was to play an Anglo-Indian character named Dr Harry. I went up to Manmohan Desai and asked him, 'Should I change my accent?' He was clear: 'No, this movie will release in small towns and they may not understand. My picture has to reach the masses.' The movie was a big hit.

While shooting for *Mard,* I was thrilled to be working with Dara Singh. I told him that one of my greatest desires was to fight with him in a film. He was very amiable and cooperative in the scene. One real knock from him would have meant three months of cancelled shoots for me; even after a soft pat from Dara-ji one required a massage to get back to normal.

During the premiere of *Mard* in Allahabad, organized for a charitable cause by Amitabh, then an MP, his introduction of me as a person was, '*Jisko maine parde pe bahut peeta hai* (Someone I have beaten a lot on screen).' My rejoinder was, '*Mein Amitabhji ka bahut shukrguzar hun. Inhone aapko abhi bataya ki main kitna shareef aadmi hun* (I am thankful to Amitabh for explaining what a nice man I am).' The audience was hysterical.

Manmohan Desai said in trade papers, 'Prem Chopra is the only versatile actor today. You make him do anything—comedy, villainy, emotional scenes, drama—he will always come out with flying colours. In recent years, Prem Chopra has developed himself into one of the finest character actors. He plays very well with expressions. That's his forte.'

Ketan Desai once said, 'They don't make people like him anymore. I used to address Prem-ji as Tiger, in those days when I was assisting my dad. And if I was ever in a mess, he would always try to adjust. I remember requesting him for an extra date as the set was waiting. He sat down to try and juggle his dates without the help of a secretary, but tried to keep everyone happy. He was so humane.

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Such emotions no longer exist in the industry. It is a lot more cut-throat and you have to move with the times. My father did not know him before he cast him for *Naseeb*, he just felt that Prem-ji would play the character well. But once they got to know each other, Prem-ji was a regular in his movies. Dad would say about him, "One of the finest actors on the silver screen. Each expression of his speaks a thousand words. Prem Chopra, the complete actor, plus a gentleman to boot."'

Desh Premee, another film with Amitabh Bachchan, had a song that featured me along with Amitabh and Hema Malini as Black singers, part of a band called Santana. It was a comic song and became very popular. I loved being a part of song sequences and dancing in them. Ironically, most of my dances were with danseuse Hema Malini (*Raja Jani, Ali Baba Aur 40 Chor, Azaad, Desh Premee*). She, of course, found my dancing hilarious.

Next, Amit and I did *Khud-daar* which was shot in Kashmir. We were in Srinagar, shooting a courtroom sequence. Vinod Mehra was on my right and an elderly man (a local extra) was on my left. I was to look worried; I had been framed for my brother's murder. After delivering a few dialogues, I started crying and said, *'Kya main apne bhai ka khoon kar sakta hoon* (Can I kill my own brother)?'

The elderly extra had started believing the proceedings at some point. After the shot was done, he patted me and with tears in his eyes said, *'Tum bilkul chinta mat karo beta, mera dil kehta hai tum riha ho jaoge. Bhagwan pe bharosa rakho* (Don't worry, my heart tells me you will be acquitted. Have faith in God).'

We continued our winning streak with *Ram Balram*, a Titu Singh film, directed by Vijay Anand. It had a huge cast and the movie had an awesome opening with full houses all over India.

Ramesh Behl, another dear friend, made *Pukar*. We shot in Goa with Amitabh Bachchan and Randhir Kapoor. My first scene was in a stadium and I was touched when people got up and started cheering my entry. Ramesh Behl remarked that I seemed to be as popular as Amitabh Bachchan.

While on the subject of popularity, I must relate an incident from the sets of *Andhaa Kanoon*. It was Rajnikanth's first film in Hindi and a great success. We were shooting in Madras and my make-up room was on the first floor. I saw a huge crowd waving outside. I stepped out and waved back to them and the people were so overcome with joy that I felt quite emotional about it. Suddenly I spotted a few people looking up at me quizzically. And then I saw Rajnikanth standing on the floor below me, wishing his fans with folded hands, and realized that the fans were his, not mine. We laugh about this to date.

My character in *Andhaa Kanoon* required me to wear thick glasses which did not allow me to see very well. My death scene in the film was handled brilliantly. Rajnikanth simply removes my glasses and pushes me on to the road. I had to work hard on my expressions for this scene where everything was a blur and I needed to run to save my life. I personally rate it as one of my best scenes. The critics of the day commented, 'Prem Chopra scores'.

Andhaa Kanoon had three or four villains. By this time, the hero was overcoming a multitude of bad men. Another example was *Shahenshah*. Amitabh Bachchan was the larger-than-life hero once again, easily handling more than one villain.

After *Daag, Trishul, Kaala Patthar* and *Sawaal*, Yash Chopra told me that I would be his permanent choice for villain and went on to offer me *Vijay* (1988), but I was not keen on the role. Finally, the role envisioned for Dilip Kumar was done by Anupam Kher while Shakti Kapoor played the role that I had been offered. After that Yash and I parted ways for a while till he cast me in *Bunty aur Babli* in 2005 in a guest appearance and the camaraderie was well and truly back again. *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* followed in 2009. A lot of people told me that I looked saintly in the get-up for *Rocket Singh*. They said, 'There was a glow on your face and in your eyes.' Wow! I was

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the same actor, wasn't I, whom everyone had loved to hate over the years? And now, with a change in image, the audience saw me as a saintly man.

After seeing the trial of *Rocket Singh*, Yash Chopra called to tell me that I had essayed a brilliant performance. He was confident that I would receive many awards that year. The film gave me a lot of critical acclaim. I even had the younger generation telling me that I had given an award-worthy performance. But the film did not do as well as expected.

★

Amitabh and I still share a familial bond and continue to be part of the important occasions in each other's lives. He is always one of the first people who call to wish me on my birthday. Once when he happened to call much later than his usual time, his first sentence was,'I remembered, as always! But since there was no network in this remote area, I had to drive some distance to establish contact; and the minute I could, I called.'

We've been very close to each other. When you have been co-stars that long, you end up sharing a lot of personal moments together. Today I am happy when I see photos of my co-actors' kids in papers!

His behaviour hasn't changed at all over the years. I've known him for a long time—from the days that filmmakers replaced him because distributors refused to buy his films. Today, he does character roles that have been written with him in mind. He has started a trend where filmmakers have started working with senior actors once again. He took a sabbatical in between and rediscovered himself. He adapted to the situation around him and climbed the ladder of success once more.

Even today we continue to hail each other in Italian as Obligardo!—a throwback to our *Great Gambler* days. When commenting on each other's performances, we use the word 'outstanding', which is a code for 'rubbish'.

Films with Amitabh Babhchan

Pyar Ki Kahani (1971), *Raaste Ka Pathar* (1972), *Gehri Chaal* (1973), *Benaam* (1974), *Do Anjaane* (1976), *Immaan Dharam* (1977), *Trishul* (1978), *Kala Pathaar* (1979), *The Great Gambler* (1979), *Dostana* (1980), *Ram Balram* (1980), *Naseeb* (1981), *Desh Premee* (1982), *Khuddaar* (1982), *Pukar* (1983), *Andhaa Kanoon* (1983), *Mard* (1985), *Shehenshah* (1988), *Hindustan Ki Kasam* (1999), *Lal Baadshah* (1999),* *Hum Kaun Hai* (2004), *Viruddh… Family Comes First* (2005), *Bunty aur Babli* (2005)*

**guest appearance*

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Prem is a most considerate co-star. His undivided focus is [on] whether the film is going to benefit his act or not; indeed, the act of all others that worked with him. Never has he attempted to do the extraordinary merely to be noticed. If it did not fall into place in the story, he deemed it incorrect.

His personal banter with his colleagues is most admirable. Even after the most intense or dramatic scenes, he eases the atmosphere with his quips and laughter. Prem is a joy, both on and off the sets. He has immense respect and care for those that come in contact with him, and has always remained so throughout his career.

My personal equation with him after Shweta's marriage into the family is one of a considerate relative, albeit distant. But even if this relation were not to be, he would still remain that lovable friend he has been all these years. We have shared some wonderful moments together on outdoor locations; moments filled with fun and laughter, of shared stories of old, of nights that stretched into mornings, talking and listening to music. He has been an asset in all the films that I have worked [in] with him, and they are many, but I am certain he is the same with every film and unit that he is a part of—bringing in that very affable quality of a good human, friendly and pleasant.

Considering the length of time we have spent together on numerous films, there cannot be just one anecdote to recall, there are several. And narrating all of them would take up a great amount of space. But one that remains with me, and I would like to believe should remain with all of us that profess to be in the acting profession, is worth mentioning here.

On an outdoor schedule in Chennai (then Madras), we were all staying in the same hotel, and consequently would spend all available time in each other's rooms. On one particular day, as Jeetendra (also with us during that schedule) and I reached the door of his room, we heard his voice repeating the same dialogues or lines in different styles and languages. It was strange hearing the same lines in English, then its meaning and expression in Hindi, followed by Punjabi. And we wondered what was going on. We discovered upon entering his room that he was listening to himself rehearsing his lines and speaking them in different styles and languages on his cassette player. At first we laughed at this unusual method, but when I paused to reflect later, I surmised that it was the perfect exercise to get the correct intonation for a dialogue to be spoken. The same line, but expressed in a different language with similar meaning, gave authenticity to the delivery of the dialogue for the film. It has been a lesson that I have not forgotten, and I still use it very often in my preparations for a role or a delivery of dialogue.

On to a lighter note! We were shooting a foot chase on the streets of Venice in Italy for the film *The Great Gambler*. I was on the run ahead and Prem and Sujit Kumar, the 'baddies' in the film, were after me. During one of the breaks, a lady watching the proceedings asked Prem what was going on. Prem, in his most straight-faced manner, convinced her that I was indeed the villain while he was the hero and the 'goody' of the film, running to catch and punish me. The dirty looks I received from that elderly lady for the rest of the shoot confirmed the 'consummate performance skills' of my teammate!

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Manoj Kumar's *Kranti* was one of the biggest movies of the eighties—the comeback of Dilip Kumar after *Bairaag*. It was written by Salim–Javed and Manoj Kumar.

My role in *Kranti* was terrific. I played Shambu Singh and I had a dialogue that became very popular, '*Shambu ka dimaag dodhari talwar hai* (Shambu's brain is like a double-edged sword).' The film is set in nineteenth-century British India, spanning from 1825 to 1875. So my looks had to progress from a young man to an old one. I was pitted against all the stalwarts of the time such as Dilip Kumar, Shashi Kapoor, Shatrughan Sinha and Manoj Kumar. A major part of the film was shot in the Jodhpur palace. There is a scene in which I tie them all up and shout, '*Yeh mahal mera hai* (This palace is mine)!'

Gaj Singh, the real maharaja of the palace, gave a party for the crew. When he was introduced to me he said, 'I heard you in the morning, announcing at the top of your voice that this property belongs to you and woe betide anyone who says otherwise!' We laughed about it; he had a ready sense of humour. Recently I met him and joked, 'My palace is with you.'

Kranti was the top grossing film of the '80s.

A critic in *Cine Advance* wrote,

> The role of the hardhearted and conspiring Shambhu Singh is a gift from Manoj Kumar to Prem Chopra and the manner in which he enacts this character makes you forget Prem Chopra and hate Shambu Singh and his kind, who inflicted as much torture on the freedom fighters as British agents with their selfish love for power and pleasure. It is a credit to the wide range of histrionic abilities of Prem Chopra who will be remembered for long as Shambu Singh.

After *Kranti*, I went on to act in *Ricky* (1986) where I played Manoj Kumar's son Kunal Goswami's father. *Kalyug aur Ramayan* (1987) had a small sequence where I dressed up as a woman for the first time. I played Bhairo Singh who is the reincarnation of (no guesses for this one) Lord Ravan, while Manoj Kumar played Pawan Putra Shri Hanuman. Manoj also made *Painter Babu* (1983), *Clerk* (1989) and *Jai Hind* (1999), but none of these films did well. He then stepped back from directing or producing movies.

★

I have come a long way since those days when I stood outside Clarks Hotel in Simla just to get a glimpse of the stars that came there….

After *Kranti*, if my car ever stalled, eager hands helped me on my way, and urchins at traffic lights greeted me with '*Shambu ka dimaag do-dhari talwar hai*'.

It was as heady as fan mail.

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The last five to ten minutes of a film are normally all about the villain; the hero and heroine are temporarily set aside. Then comes the climax—the villain is subdued, the film is summarized and 'The End' flashes on the screen!

1981
Film: *Aas Paas*

Prem Chopra has just tried to strangle a comatose Hema Malini in a hospital room. Dharmendra reveals himself to tell Prem that he had set a trap to make sure that he (Prem) was the villain.

PC: '*Ek saboot toh khatm ho gaya, ab sirf tum baki ho. Agar tum zinda rahe, toh mein khatm ho jaaonga* (I have destroyed one witness, now only you remain! And, if you continue to live, it means I am dead)!'

After revealing more of his deviousness he says, '*Do martaba tum martey martey bach gaye kyunki tumhe maarne ke liye maine kisi ka sahara liya tha. Lekin aaj…aaj main tumhe zinda nahin chhodunga* (You escaped twice from death, because I appointed others to kill you. But today I will not leave you alive)!'

Dharmendra in his typical style: '*Tumne meri didi ko dhokha diya, mujhe maut ki ghat mein utaarna chaha. Tune Seema ki izzat loot li! Aaj main tujhe zinda nahin chhodunga!* (You deceived my sister; you tried to kill me! You raped Seema! I'll not leave you alive today!)'

Then 'dishoom dishoom' and more 'dishoom dishoom' until I conveniently fall on some broken glass which tears my stomach. Blood flows out and with cries of 'Aa-aa-aa', I slump.

★

Aas Paas was directed by J. Om Prakash. I had a meaty role and my performance was appreciated right from the trial show. I was told that I would soar high after this movie. Though negative, it was multi-layered, a strong role.

Another successful film, *Ek Aur Ek Gyaarah* (1981), co-starred Vinod Khanna and Shashi Kapoor. We were shooting a very dramatic scene in Roop Tara Studio. I had to deliver a long dialogue holding a gun in a close-up shot. The minute I started my dialogue, Shashi the prankster poked my butt. I stopped abruptly mid-dialogue. He kept repeating this caper till I decided to ignore him and finish the shot. The final take was with him still poking me while I delivered my dialogues.

Shashi and I also did *Bandhan Kuchchey Dhaagon Ka* (1983) around this time. It was Anil Sharma's directorial venture and I performed the clap for that film. Subsequently, Anil Sharma has invited me for the clap of some of his other films. I did a couple of movies for him such as *Hukumat* (1987), *Tehelka* (1992) and *Maharaja* (1998). Most of his movies starred Dharmendra.

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Hukumat was a multi starrer movie. We were shooting in a club in Nainital when a unit member slapped an assistant. The unnecessary humiliation of a simple man was too much for me. I fought for him—life is about standing up for what is right.

In the eighties, I had an opportunity to co-star with Raj Kapoor once again in *Gopichand Jasoos*. It was shot in Bombay with one sequence on a ship. The film was produced and directed by Naresh Kumar and did quite well. Raj Kapoor, given his stature, rarely advised the director or interfered with his work. In one instance, though, he advised Naresh Kumar to place the camera in a position that Raj-ji felt was appropriate. When Naresh disagreed, Raj-ji simply shrugged his shoulders and went along with the director's ideas. It was a personal insight into his interaction with other directors. He just suggested, he never interfered! In fact, my reaction was, 'How could Naresh disregard the master's advice?'

In the late '80s I performed playback for the film *Mera Muqaddar* (1988) with Kavita Krishnamurty. We managed to record the song in one take and Kavita thought I was good, I seemed to be in rhythm. Since she is a professional singer, her praise gave me confidence. The song became very popular and I performed it several times on shows. I even created a tune while singing it, which the music director Kamal Kant also adopted.

The lyrics were very much in the 'Prem Chopra' image and I created a comical farce for shows. The public greatly enjoyed this item and so did I…

Hai hungama, lut gaya mama
Tu meri jaan, mein tera jaan,
Aaja aaja aaja aaja…

★

The Ramsay brothers had started making horror films during that time and pretty much had a monopoly over this genre. I played the central role in *Saboot* (1980), which performed decently.

Other Ramsay movies that I acted in were *Sansani* (1981), *Telephone* (1985) and *3D Saamri* (1985)—the last being noteworthy as it was one of the first 3D films of Bollywood. It did well. Even though we were making a horror film, the atmosphere was of fun. All the Ramsays were hard-working and personally involved in the different aspects of filmmaking. Take *3D Saamri* for instance. While it was directed by Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, the screenplay was by Kumar Ramsay and the cinematography by Gangu Ramsay. The producers were Anjali Ramsay and Tulsi Ramsay and their associate was Arjun Ramsay. Their father F.U. Ramsay was the presenter.

By the '80s, a lot more movies were based on the underworld. *Kali Basti* (1985), for instance, saw me playing the role of Kuber Nath, the hero's underworld boss. The movie was started with Vinod Khanna but he went and joined Acharya Rajneesh during that period, leaving the film incomplete. The makers replaced him with Shatrughan Sinha. The film did not do well, though.

It was in the mid-eighties that Nutan's son Mohnish Behl was introduced in *Teri Baahon Mein* (1984). We were shooting a scene where Mohnish had to hit me when it suddenly dawned on me that I was ready to move on. I was doing the same things over and over again. I wanted out; I was ready for a change.

Films I did in the 1980s

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Ek Aur Ek Gyaarah (1981), *Aas Paas* (1981), *Bandhan Kacheche Dhagon Ka* (1983), *Mera Muqadar* (1988), *Hukumat* (1987), *Tehelka* (1992), *Maharaja* (1998), *Gopichand Jasoos* (1982), *Nagina* (1986), *Teri Baahon Mein* (1984), *Saboot* (1980), *Sansani* (1981), *Telephone* (1985), *3D Saamri* (1985).

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The Second Innings of Rajesh Khanna

Aanchal was released in 1980 and starred Rajesh Khanna along with Raakhee and Rekha as the main protagonists. Most of the film was shot in Calcutta (now Kolkata). I played the role of Jaggan Prasad, a moneylender; a multilayered role with an added quirk of going around on a scooter with a driver. The movie was a blockbuster.

Souten (1983) directed by Saawan Kumar Tak, was a well made film and proved to be a big hit. Rajesh Khanna had lost his numero uno position to Amitabh Bachchan by then. This film had the crowds rediscovering Rajesh Khanna the actor, and theatres in the suburbs of Bombay screened some of his old hits, cashing in on public interest.

I remember a public function in the Middle East when I was requested to deliver the famous dialogue from *Souten*, '*Main woh bala hoon jo sheeshe se patthar ko todta hoon* (I am that menace who crushes stones with glass).' I cherish those moments when the audience applauded and the hall resounded with cries of encore! It is heartening to know that although I'm a villain on the screen, I am well loved!

Saawan Kumar Tak can be quite witty and humorous in the presence of female company. Half a dozen young girls must have been present on the sets of *Souten* one day when Tak yelled out to me, 'I just received some news from Mauritius that all the babies born after we returned from our last schedule there look just like you!' To which I promptly retorted, 'That must be the reason for the change in their government—I have so many lookalikes in Mauritius!' I had the girls laughing with me, not at me, as Tak wanted.

Rajesh Khanna and I followed up our association with *Maqsad* (1984), directed by K. Bapaiah for producer D. Ramanaidu. It was the second highest grosser of the year and I went on to do several films with K. Bapaiah. Pramod Chakravorty's *Shatru* (1986), co-starring Rajesh Khanna once again, was an Indo–Bangladesh venture; another hit.

Rajesh and I had a lot of hits together. He remained aloof, but you couldn't really blame him for it. He needed friends who could be with him all the time; I was individualistic. But once you got to know him, you realized he was a rare man—he had many plus points.

I tried to reach out to him in his last days. I wanted to meet him and tell him I was there for him. But he had withdrawn into himself and I chose to respect his need for privacy.

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The 1980s: Films with South Indian Directors and Producers

The filmmakers from the South were different from their Bombay counterparts in their encouragement of a professional atmosphere and insistence on discipline and punctuality. They were there to stay and we actors were willing to work with them.

Being part of their movies invariably meant working with Jeetendra. At least nine out of ten movies that I did with South Indian producers during the '80s had Jeetendra. Those that didn't have Jeetendra had Mithun Chakraborty and some had both. *Nishana* (1980), *Farz Aur Kanoon* (1982), *Mawaali, Swarg Se Sunder* (1986), *Sindoor* (1987), *Prem Tapasya* (1983), *Sarfarosh* (1985), *Haqeeqat* (1985), *Insaf Ki Pukaar* (1987)—all these films starred Jeetendra, whereas the random *Ghar Ek Mandir* (1984) and *Charnon Ki Saugandh* (1988) were Mithun starrers.

Nishana, the remake of a Tamil film, was a K. Raghavendra Rao film and proved to be a delightful work. I had already worked with his father K.S. Prakash Rao, who was the director of *Prem Nagar*. By now, I was among the seniors in the industry and had started working with the next generation of actors and directors. The film was shot in Ooty during the summer and my family accompanied me.

My outfits for *Nishana* were extremely comical—I sported only one colour for a scene. For example, if I chose to wear a yellow coat then it had to be coordinated with yellow pants, a yellow hat and a yellow rose and so on. The rose was meant for Poonam Dhillon whom I was trying to woo. My children looked forward to my outfits each day with glee.

K. Raghavendra Rao then repeated me in *Farz Aur Kanoon* in a very positive role. The critics commented, 'Prem Chopra has, for a change, enacted the role of a retired army man quite beautifully. Here is a competent artiste whose potential has yet not been tapped in spite of hundreds of appearances in films.' *Sunday Standard* posted a review for *Dostana* and *Nishana* which were released around the same time: 'It seems Prem Chopra has never stopped fighting—that man must be made of iron.'

Mawaali was a remake of a Telegu film and did very well. It starred Jeetendra, Sridevi and Jaya Prada. The Hindi version was directed by K. Bapaiah. I played Sridevi's father. The tide was turning—from playing the villain who was vying for the hand of the heroine, I was beginning to play the father.

Mawaali was a rather silly role, complete with lungi-flapping and theatrical dialogues. I was amused to note that a lot of people liked it and realized once again that the box office is the ultimate judge. Anything you do is acceptable as long as the film clicks.

Mawaali was followed by *Ghar Ek Mandir, Swarg Se Sunder* and *Charnon Ki Saugandh* in quick succession, all directed by K. Bapaiah and produced by A. Krishnamurthy. All fared well.

Sindoor had me essaying a double role and *Screen* carried a special mention, 'the court trial of the twin brothers Hiralal and Pannalal enacted by Prem Chopra is quite hilarious.'

In *Prem Tapasya*, I played the role of Dr Nandlal Kumar Singh, the heroine's brother. This film was directed by Dasari Narayan Rao and had Jeetendra in the lead. It was a positive role, the remake of a Telegu film. Most of these movies were remakes. My role was appreciated, though the film did not do well. My youngest daughter Prerana and I laid a hundred-rupee bet with my eldest daughter Rakita, predicting the movie's outcome. I was sad. Prerana kept her

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eyes on Rakita instead of the film to catch her crying. Rakita, longing to cry, but conscious of two pairs of eyes checking on her, refrained from doing so and won the bet.

Sarfarosh, also directed by Dasari Narayana Rao, was Jeetendra's film produced by his brother under the banner of Tirupati Pictures. It was shot in Madras and did quite well.

Raksha (1981) and *Bond 303* (1985) were other movies that Jeetu and I did at that time. Both were espionage movies and did average business.

Haqeeqat was another successful film that we shot in Madras. It was directed by T. Rama Rao and starred Jeetendra and Jaya Prada. T. Rama Rao had been the director for *Andhaa Kanoon, Insaf Ki Pukar* and *Watan Ke Rakhwale* (1987). All were successful films.

All shoots were not fun and games. A tragedy that occurred while shooting for the climax of a film comes to mind. I was among the few present. The fight director's assistant was positioned close to a bomb ready for detonation. Due to some miscalculation, the bomb was activated much before the scheduled time, resulting in the assistant losing his hand. I actually saw his hand being ripped off and pieces of flesh being torn from his body. It was such a gruesome sight. We were sitting very close to the spot where the bomb exploded and had a miraculous escape.

This incident brings into sharp focus the lack of safety precautions in our studios. Though the smoke settled down on this tragedy, the lessons were yet to be learnt. There was absolutely no need to use such a powerful bomb. And even if they did, utmost care and precautions should have been taken. The problem is that we economize on hiring trained people for such tasks; life is cheap in India. It is certainly not the last time that such an accident will occur. Catastrophes will happen in the future too, as experience is an expensive school and our filmmakers will learn at no other.

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The 1980s would have been a challenging time for any newcomer. Amitabh Bachchan was on the decline by the second half; the Khans were yet to arrive, and the entire industry was floundering. All actors, without exception, had to make do with plots that were rehashes of a stale formula, executed without any technical finesse.

Given this scenario, from the debutants who tried to become the next 'angry young man', only a few could make a mark and survive the creative bankruptcy.

Star sons Sunny Deol, Kumar Gaurav, Sanjay Dutt, Rajiv Kapoor and Kunal Goswami were launched. I had worked with their fathers Dharmendra, Rajendra Kumar, Sunil Dutt, Raj Kapoor and Manoj Kumar, respectively. It was time to give way to the new order. The star sons received mixed response at the box office. Still more entered the fray to impress briefly before vanishing into oblivion. I started playing older roles. I was now the heroine's dad or relative, who was against her alliance with the hero.

Jackie Shroff, Anil Kapoor and Sunny Deol, who made their debuts in the '80s, were part of the better films of that period, while Govinda and Mithun delivered a few assembly-line hits. Mithun did not debut in the '80s, but this was his most commercially rewarding and impactful decade.

Betaab (1983), Sunny Deol's debut, directed by Rahul Rawail, was one of the biggest hits of the year. Sunny Deol underplayed his character in the film, to my great admiration. Thirty years after Sunny's debut with me, both of us came together in *I Love NY* (forthcoming). This time I played his father.

Sunny has a natural sense of visualization. He should make another attempt as a director. I believe he will be successful. His chronic back problem affects his projects.

Sunny and I came together for *Manzil Manzil* (1984) after *Betaab*, I was working with Nazir Hussain again after *Teesri Manzil*—a gap of almost twenty years. Since the film was being shot near my house, I decided to drop in at home during a break. I was still sporting the white beard which was part of my characterization, when I rung the bell. All hell broke loose as Prerana refused to allow a stranger into her home. I kept telling her, 'It is me, your Papa,' and she continued to insist, 'I know who my Papa is; you are not my Papa.' She stood her ground, unwilling to let this strange old man enter the house. Finally, hearing the commotion, Uma, Rakita and Punita emerged and I was allowed entry.

Arjun (1985), another film with Sunny, was a first-class political film directed by Rahul Rawail. I played Chief Minister Deen Dayal Trivedi. It went on to be a major hit. By the eighties, the politician had started emerging as the villain.

The 1990s, too, continued with the politician being a villain and I did films like *Phool Bane Angaarey* and *Aasoo Bane Angaarey* (1993).

Sunny and I continued working together in *Saveray Wali Gaadi* (1986). It was a bold film, requiring the female protagonist to walk naked on the streets of a town in one scene. The incident was taken from a real life incident in the country's interiors.

Another movie with Sunny was Pahlaj Nihalani's *Aag Hi Aag* (1989). I had been a regular

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with Pahlaj's films since his first production, *Haathkadi*, and we continued to share a good rapport. Pahlaj was a fine producer—he shot the movie in Goa and it did well.

Another actor Pahlaj signed on at the time was the upcoming star Govinda. We were together in *Ilzaam* (1986) where I played actress Neelam's dad. She seemed conscious and nervous. I tried to make her comfortable. This was one of Govinda's first films and went on to celebrate a silver jubilee.

Pahlaj Nihalani's *Mitti aur Sona* (1989) was also a hit film. We shot for *Gunahon Ka Faisla* (1988) at the same time and both films had Chunky Pandey in pivotal roles. I took my kids along to Bangalore and Mysore for this shoot.

In the '80s I also starred with Anil Kapoor in *Rakhwala* (1989), a D. Ramanaidu film, and *Abhimanyu* (1989), produced by Tony Juneja. I had good roles, with a long dialogue in one particular scene, which had to be filmed in one shot. The unit gave a standing ovation. Both films did well.

I acted in *Preeti* (1986) and *Shukriyaa* (1988) with Rajiv Kapoor as well; unfortunately both did not do well.

Mithun Chakraborty and I did *Daata* (1989), a Sultan Ahmed film, where my track was central to the movie—more along the lines of Kanhaiyalal's character in many of his films. My daughter is murdered in the movie, and I turn mad with grief. There was a song picturized on me. My performance was appreciated and the movie did well.

Mithun and I went on to do many films during this decade like *Dana Paani* (1989), *Garibon Ka Daata* (1989), *Avinash* (1986), *Charnon Ki Saugandh* (1988) and *Sagar Sangam* (1988).

Misguided by industry advisers, I turned down the huge hit *Himmatwala* (1983). I missed some other opportunities too, resulting in a short lapse in my career. But I sprung back into action with character roles in *Betaab* (1983) and *Andhaa Kaanoon* (1983). People started casting me in older roles, but they were substantial, well-etched.

★

By the end of the '80s I had come a long way, with twenty-five years and over a hundred and fifty films to my credit. There was no dearth of work. I felt a sense of achievement. Yet, there were times when I felt I had fallen short of my own standards and tears of dissatisfaction would flow down my cheeks.

I love my profession and all those associated with it. I have always steered clear of petty politics and nepotism of any kind. I don't believe in playing up to anyone merely to get a role. Nor do I believe in overworking simply for the lure of money. I've always strived to be the complete professional and it has paid rich dividends for me.

From raping heroines, I was easing into playing their father in the '80s and '90s. In *Insaaf Ki Pukar* I played Bhanupriya's father, in *Ilzaam* I was Neelam's father and in *Mawaali* I acted as Sridevi's father.

When I saw the new breed of actors and actresses in the '80s with their bold lifestyles and Americanized accents, the star sons especially, I reflected that the old order was changing. I also realized that the acting profession, like life itself, is about the survival of the fittest. Responsibility and dedication are the key ingredients in the creation of the respectable image of an actor. If I have survived three generations of actors, it was because my priority was work. I learnt to mind my own business and let my work speak for itself.

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But an actor cannot afford to rest on his laurels. He must always remain on the lookout for more challenging roles. And, who knows, the best may be yet to come.

An adverse development of the late ’80s was that my name was included in a list by the combine, restricting actors from taking up more than twelve films at a time. I protested in an article in *Filmfare*.

> An actor should be allowed to work in only four films provided they make films the way they do in Hollywood. Once a producer signs you for a stipulated period of time, you’re not allowed to work in any other film. After his work is over the actor is free to move on to another project. It would not only improve the actor’s performances but the general quality of films as well. But as things stand today, I feel the producers need to be enlightened. Though I’ve twelve films on hand, I am only working for ten days in a month on an average. The rest of the time shootings are cancelled because the producer has run out of finances. I am one of those on the banned list, but I don’t know why. I never signed up for too many films. True, a lot of my films are ready for release, but some of these were signed five years ago. It’s not fair to mix these films with my present assignments. I’ve never done a double shift, so why include my name? I think this is a crazy idea. It will die a natural death. (*Filmfare,* 1989)

Recently, I decided to check the average number of scenes I had in a movie made in the ’80s. I picked up *Trishul*, a multi starrer where I played the sole villain. I had a total of five scenes, co-starring Amitabh Bachchan, Sanjeev Kumar and Shashi Kapoor. I reviewed *Kala Patthar* and *Dhan Daulat* with similar results. An Indian film would typically have five to six songs by the hero and heroine to establish the romantic angle, then the focus would shift to their homes and family. A comedy angle could also be thrown in before the villain came on to the scene to add to the drama. The actor playing the negative character had to be almost supernatural to create a lasting impression of villainy in the limited scenes that came his way. So the restriction on me was completely unfair.

★

By the second half of the ’80s other villains were coming to the forefront and journalists would ask pointed questions like:

‘Do you see films apart from your own? Have you seen *Sholay*? Would you have been able to do the Gabbar Singh role as effectively?’ or

‘Bindu and you were a popular twosome. Don’t you think you were lucky for one another and that you can stage an effective “comeback” together?’ or

‘Are you happy with roles coming your way? Wouldn’t it be more dignified for you to retire? How many years have you spent in the line? For how many years can you carry on?’

I had been around for so long that I could predict the questions that the new generation would ask me. I wished they would do their homework and ask me intelligent and perceptive questions. In one instance, a journalist had been trying to bait me into giving a controversial statement. When I informed her that I had worked with *TOI,* she understood why she had not been able to fool me with her questions.

Once journalists realized that they would not get a headline-worthy reaction from me, they

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would make their peace and carry on with the remaining questions.

That is Prem Chopra for you—I do not wish to gossip or be involved in any politics.

Films I did in the second half of the 1980s

Betaab (1983), *Manzil Manzil* (1984), *Arjun* (1985), *Aag Ka Gola* (1989), *Hathkadi* (1982), *Ilzaam* (1986), *Rakhwala* (1989), *Abhimanyu* (1989), *Preeti* (1986), *Shukriyaa* (1988), *Daata* (1989), *Dana Paani* (1988), *Garibon Ka Daata* (1989), *Avinash* (1986), *Charnon Ki Saugandh* (1988), *Sagar Sangam* (1988), *Mitti aur Sona* (1989), *Gunahon Ka Faisla* (1988)

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On the Villain

1973
Film: *Gehri Chaal*

I am hit by Jeetendra and then passed on to Amitabh Bachchan for him to extract his pound of flesh. Not to be outdone, Hema joins in to administer a few lashes with a hunter. All of them have scores to settle quickly before the police arrive to nab me and 'The End' flashes on the screen.

The films of the '70s and '80s were replete with clichés. The heroine always had one item number to perform in front of the villain. He was the perennial 'kabab mein haddi', bent on marrying the heroine. My roles in *Gora Aur Kala, Chhupa Rustam* and *Raja Jani* bear testimony to these clichés. However, sadly for me (the villain), the hero always got the heroine.

My experience more than qualifies me to pass the edict that it is much more difficult to play the bad man than the good man. While the hero treads the straight and narrow line, the villain has a role which encompasses multiple shades. You have to be a very close observer of life to be a good actor, but you have to be a keen observer if you wish to play a believable bad character. I have never lost touch with life and never will; if I am to remain an actor, I have to be able to breathe life into the characters I play.

When I set foot into films in the early '60s, I observed that subtleness was missing in villainy. I learnt a lot from others, but never tried to copy anyone's acting style. I worked out the image of a villain in my own way and tried it out slowly. Though not all producers approved of my style, the masses certainly appreciated it.

To take an instance, a villain craves money and will go to any lengths to accumulate wealth. His methods are underhand and unacceptable by society, but he suffers no qualms. Now, as an actor, when I flesh out this character, my mannerisms and behaviour must embody all these characteristics. Only then would I succeed in bringing this character to life and receive my rightful accolades.

There were other challenges in this period for both villains and heroes. They were acting in at least twenty to thirty films at a time—unheard of anywhere else in the world. While the stars in the West were given the script six months ahead of the shooting schedule, actors here were often handed their lines on the sets. Often, a director would simply urge a seasoned actor to use his much vetted lines or gestures that had stood the test of time. In a scenario defined by loose script or no script, poor characterization and an apathetic director, the onus was completely on the actor if he/she wished to stand tall.

I constantly sought variations in my roles as a villain. I was always playing the bad man—a smuggler or a rapist. Within the set framework I introduced variations to layer my characters, which the audience embraced. For example, *Do Musafir,* which required me to speak in chaste Urdu, though this was not a problem since I had studied in that medium. I was cast in the role of the villain and interpreted this with comic shade.

Nuances have to be built into the character without compromising on its impact. Repetition of

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any kind results in monotony, for the actor as well as his audience.

★

Mohan Kumar reminisces

Prem's diction was very good, he spoke correct Hindustani—what we call a combination of Hindi and Urdu. His speech and accent was very clear with no Punjabiat in it.

★

Being a villain had its own advantages. There were constant ego clashes between two heroes acting in a film as they sought to claim greater footage and attention than the other. The villain had no such problems. Even the biggest of heroes don't snatch scenes from him, knowing that it is absolutely necessary to emphasize villainy in order to highlight their own heroics.

Yet, at times, some of them had their issues if the villains were given more footage in the film than them. They didn't like it if I earned as much or more praise than them; in fact, some of them were nasty to me. But I kept my peace. If I had turned around and retorted, it would have been playing into their hands. But an equal number of actors appreciated the fact that villains were given equal importance as them. They knew that it gave them a better chance of emerging the snow-white hero or the knight in silver armour.

The concept of villainy is changing as it mirrors more and more of the harsh realities of life. The villain is more human today. The gaudy dresses and jarring notes are out. Today's villain is more realistic, you see him in your everyday life. The vamp, too, does not exist anymore as it's the heroines who do the item numbers.

How did I aspire to be 'different'?

A villain has to subtly combine the artificial with the natural. To do this successfully, he has to be crafty, well read, experienced and widely travelled with a pleasing personality. His job may demand him to portray a cheat, betray and destroy, exploit and blackmail a man or woman, family, society, and even his country. He has to display consideration and compassion in order to win confidence, but when the crunch comes, he must reveal himself as a conman, trickster or betrayer. All villains of history, films and life have been drawn like that. I was no different!

I believe an actor has to keep growing, and that's challenging. The only exception was Dev Anand. He was Dev Anand in all the films that I worked with him.

Yet no villain, new or old, can sustain being 'different' in this industry. The basic problem is with the writer. Once something clicks, it becomes the accepted mantra. The writer adopts this mantra, unwilling to risk himself and blaze new trails, and the actor suffers as his roles increasingly look like parodies of his own self. I had successfully blended villainy with a tinge of comedy in *Raja Jani* and *Chhupa Rustam*. I took the risk, hoping to infuse freshness into my roles as a villain, and it worked.

Unfortunately, a character actor simply remains a character in the movie. The inevitable question in the '80s used to be, *'Sunny Deol ka project hai? Ya Jackie ka* (Is it a Sunny Deol or Jackie [Shroff] film)?' Publicity and reviews are always concentrated on the heroes. I dominated *Do*

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Anjaane in spite of Amitabh Bachchan, and in *Dostana* my character was on a par with both Amitabh and Shatrughan. But they enjoyed an enviable position with regard to publicity, titles and reviews.

A villain never finds a prominent place on the billboard or on posters. And there is a reason for it—one cannot and should not glamourize the negative.

I disagree with the popular belief that it's the character artiste who is mauled at the editing table. That would be detrimental to a film. A Yash Chopra or a Raj Kapoor would never allow that to happen. My belief is that it's the director who makes or mars a film. Another fine director, Manoj Kumar, always laid great importance on characters. Manmohan Desai's greatness lay in the fact that he was willing to incorporate the suggestions of a spot boy if they appealed to him.

A magazine questioned me about people accusing me of overacting. I replied, 'I think Indian films tend to be a little louder than real life. That's for the sake of our masses—to make them understand.' Perhaps I may have been overacting, but then some sections of the press were also complimenting me, 'rare performance seen on the Indian screen by Prem Chopra in *Kaala Patthar*'. Certain characters need overplaying, especially negative characters, to create the desired impact.

I was often asked, 'How different was the '70s and '80s villain from today?' Well, a character is better defined today; the 'history' of the villain is spelt out. In the absence of such definition, the '60s and '70s villain was necessarily loud on the screen. Today I find that performances are better, though people still term me as an actor who speaks normally but effectively.

You cannot be a villain simply by chance. It goes without saying that you have talent. You are an actor first and only after that a hero, a villain, a comedian or a character actor. Normally, a villain had only a few scenes. My main challenge was to create an impact in my allotted time and space. I had to embellish my act with gestures and looks; good dialogues were definitely a bonus. In most films of the time, the hero was the idealist and the villain a realist. Though both desired wealth, the villain went to any lengths to achieve his ends.

But this was all part of the make-believe of cinema. Meanwhile, a headline for one of my interviews read, 'I am not a villain in real life.'

1980
Film: *Dhan Daulat*
Actors: Rishi Kapoor and Prem Chopra

There is actual poetry in the villain's reasoning:

Chalney ke liye sirf sadak hi kafi nahi, taangon ki bhi zaroorat padti hai,
Udney ke liye sirf aasmaan hi kafi nahi, paron ki bhi zaroorat padti hai,
Kisi ko katal karney ke liye iraada hi kafi nahi;
Hatyaaron ki bhi zaroorat padti hai…
…aur voh hatyaar main tumhe de sakta hoon!

(To walk, you don't just need a road, you also need legs,
To fly, the sky is not enough, you need wings too,
To murder someone, the intention is not enough, you need a weapon…
…and I can give you that weapon!)

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From the Archives…

I Believe (*Stardust*, March 1980)

These are a few of my favourite things!

Love is—an interesting incident in a man's life; but the history of a woman's
Happiness is—a mystery
Sorrow is—to be restless and distressed
Desire is—to be desired
Ambition is—pitiless
Humour is—at one's own cost, never others'. Laugh with people, never at them
Sex appeal is—a compatible and mature mind
Boredom is—to have to listen to a drunkard when not drunk
Embarrassment is—the year of my birth
Superstition is—fear of a purely personal belief
Disillusionment is—to find your favourite ordinary, on meeting
Possession is—the sublime moments
Confidence is—to be the confidant of other people's follies
Friendship is—not to display, but to feel and prove things
Laughter is—the best medicine and the least expensive
Pity is—for those wise people who think all others are fools
Beauty is—truth and honesty
Ugliness—is hypocrisy
Life is—a Q? Answer it. It is also a challenge, face it.
Success is—the sweetest taste
Failure is—the stepping stone for the challengers
Showbiz is—most unpredictable
My motto—be nice to people on your way up; they may reciprocate on the way down
My birthday—curiosity of all: the year of birth
Cheers!

★

***Star & Style*, 1 December 1978**

What do you take seriously—*My work, otherwise it'd be very tough to stay in this line, sincerity towards your profession is very essential*.

What do you not take seriously—*Myself, my women, gossip and politics in the industry.*

On laughing—*There's nothing like laughter, it can chase away even the bluest of your Mondays. I don't know why some people get into moods unnecessarily and throw their weight around. They not only spoil things for themselves but also for those around. Why not just laugh and relax. It's much more fun.*

On people who are funny—*I think it's an enviable quality to be funny, to make others laugh,*

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like even in my case, in spite of being a villain, people expect something funny when I'm on screen. It's beautiful to be able to give comic relief in this otherwise drab, mechanical life.

On being told jokes—*Of course I like listening to jokes and when the atmosphere and the company is right, telling jokes can be the most exhilarating way of keeping the atmosphere easy and warm.*

In fact Feroz Khan once said, 'Prem is in the wrong line—he should have been a comedian! His sense of humour is tireless.'

***Movie Jagat,* 27 July 1984**

Favourite director: *David Lean, Steven Spielberg*
Favourite singer: *Kishore Kumar*
Favourite food: *Continental*
Favourite player: *Kapil Dev*
Love: *Truth*
Hate: *Hypocrisy*
Impressed by: *Self-made people*
People I don't like: *Liars*
Favourite book—*Charlie Chaplin's autobiography*
Favourite colour—*Black*
Hobby: *Travelling*
When I have time I: *Watch movies*
I am scared of: *Snakes*
I trust: *Myself*
I want to be: *The greatest performer*
Favourite films: *Dr Zhivago, Schindler's List*
My closest person: *Wife*
Shooting mein romanchak kshan: *Dramatic scene*
I would like to tell my fans: *Live by the happiness of others, and not their miseries*

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It was at a Kishore Kumar–Asha Bhonsle show that I walked on stage and R.D. Burman quipped, 'Start up the rape music.' Yet I got the loudest applause with my ever popular dialogue, '*Prem naam hai mera, Prem Chopra.*'

The Nirbhaya gangrape case in December 2012 has been a catalyst for policing change in not only the attitude of the police and other agencies towards crime against women, but also amongst the public. The mindset of the people has altered, and a rape victim need not suffer for the rest of her life. More people are coming forward to report similar crimes, which were earlier hidden behind closed doors.

Keeping in view the sensitivity of the issue, this section is only a statement of how Bollywood films in the '70s and '80s dealt with rape. In no way does it belittle such crimes.

★

1972
Film: *Daag*

Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore are newly married and visit Prem Chopra, as Rajesh Khanna has been given a job in his office. They are given Prem Chopra's room till an alternate accommodation can be arranged for them. Rajesh Khanna leaves the house for work and Prem Chopra knocks on the door. Though these may not be the exact dialogues, I hope to have captured the essence of 'Prem, Prem Chopra':

ST: *Arrey, aap! Jee, kahiye...* (Oh, it's you)

PC: (sly smile, slow dialogue delivery) *Muaaf keejiyega, lekin mujhe apne tijori se kuch samaan nikaalna hai...* (Pardon me, but I have to take some stuff from my locker…)

ST: *Arrey, zaroor, zaroor, vaisey bhi humne aapko takleef di*. (Of course, sorry for troubling you.)

PC: *Kabhi takleef main bhi bahut mazaa aata hai*. (Sometimes trouble can be fun.)

PC opens the safe, and takes out a huge bundle of cash

PC: *Aap zara meri madat karengi? Yeh apne haath mein sambhaliye zara.* (Can you help me? Please hold this.)

ST: *Zaroor.* (Of course).

She takes the bundle in her hands.

PC hands her some more money and jewels from the safe.

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ST is overloaded with money and jewellery, now PC makes his move.

PC: (sly smile, looks at ST) *Agar yeh saare note aapko de diye jayen toh kaisa rahega?* (How would you like it if I give you all this?)

ST (throwing the money): *Kya keh rahen hai aap. Nikal jaiye mere kamre se!* (What are you saying? Get out of the room!)

PC smiles at her and delivers the next lines in his inimitable manner: *Kamaal hai, hamare hi kamre se humein nikala jaa raha hai.* (Throwing me out of my own room?)

ST (hysterical now): *Maine aapko shareef aadmi samjha tha, tum bilkul neech nikley.* (I thought you were a decent man, but you're a slimeball.)

PC: *Neech aadmi bhi vahi kaam karte hain jo shareef karte hai. Maine kaha tha yahan chaaron taraf bilkul sukoon, aaram, aur khamoshi hai.* (Indecent men do the same things as decent ones. I had told you there's peace and quiet all around.)

ST tries to run behind the curtain for protection.

PC draws it open. The sound effect is of a cloth being ripped off. ST screams her husband's name. Note that since she is the heroine and not the hero's sister, her husband Rajesh Khanna promptly arrives to save her honour. And a one-sided fight sequence ensues.

Dishoom dishoom dishoom!

★

Other heroines' responses consisted of a linear combination of the following lines:

Rekha (in *Ab Insaf Hoga*, 1995)*: Sethji, yeh kya kar rahein hai aap… chhod do mujhe, main tumhare haath jodti hoon.* (Sethji, what are you doing…leave me, I beg you.)

Rakhee (in *Aanchal): Arre hum toh tumhar moh noch le!* (I'll claw your face!)

Saira Banu (in *Purab Aur Paschhm): Nahiiiiiiiin!* (No!)

Asha Parekh (in *Kati Patang): Neech kameene!* (You disgusting creature!)

And the situation deteriorates with my responses, which are probably a selection of the following lines:

Arrey jaaneman, maan jaao, rani bankar rahogi! (Come on darling, I'll treat you like a queen!)

Bhagti kahan ho jaaneman! (Where do you think you're going!)

Maine saare darwaze band kar diye hain... bhagne ka koi raasta nahin! (I have locked all the doors…there's no place to run!)

★

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Many people are interested in knowing my emotions as I performed all those rape scenes. I shared perfect harmony with my female co-stars during such shots. I was very professional and ensured that no untoward incident ever took place. I always kept one point in mind—an image on the screen should never be confused with the reality off the screen. I have seen many top actors of Hollywood, who are very simple people, transform themselves into dynamic personalities on screen.

I am of the view that rape scenes need to be part of a film only when they are crucial to the plot. Unfortunately, commercial cinema may have such scenes without any relevance.

In one of my films in the late '70s, I was to hold a popular heroine's arm in a particularly dramatic scene. She wasn't getting her expressions right and we kept doing retakes. When the shot was finally canned, she complained that I had bruised her arm and she could not come for shooting the next day. The director tried to reason with her unsuccessfully. Soon after, a scene required her to slap me, which she did with unnecessary vehemence. I naturally complained to the director and was told that she had insisted on this scene as she wanted revenge.

Revenge?

It was something that had to be done; all of us knew it from the time we had been given the script. There were constant nakhras from this actress for rape scenes. Top actresses like Saira Banu, Sadhana, Asha Parekh and Hema Malini have also enacted similar scenes with me. They were very professional and therefore takes would be done quickly.

In fact, what comes to mind is the inherent grace and dignity that Saira brought to the set. Many other heroines were like her—they accepted the demands of their job and worked without fuss.

At this point, I wish to make it eminently clear that I'm an actor first and a bad guy or a good guy afterwards. I am a professional and therefore I like to do things well. I have nothing against rape scenes but there must be a motive, a reason behind them…ample reason. Thankfully, we don't have senseless rape scenes in our films anymore. I remember a time when the credentials of a villain were confirmed only after he had raped the heroine or the hero's sister!

The audience of today is more intelligent, more sensitive to these issues. Cinegoers are no longer interested in watching rapes for sensational value. But if it forms an important part of the story, if it has a significant bearing on the events that follow, then rape can be used constructively by a good scriptwriter and capable director to achieve remarkable results. For instance, my character raped and murdered Sarika in *Kranti*, against the backdrop of conspiracy. *Aap Aye Bahar Ayee* is a case of mistaken identity where Sadhana gets into bed with me, presuming it to be Rajendra Kumar. The actual act is not seen. The camera cuts to the fireplace and a scream is shown on Rajendra Kumar's face, who is sitting outdoors at that time. Both the sequences mentioned give a turbulent twist to the entire story of the films. So you see, a rape in any film must be thoroughly convincing and its effect, its impact on the characters clearly defined.

My idea of an aesthetically depicted rape was always the more symbolic variety than the tearing around, which had become too amateurish and stale to be accepted. I had always opted for either symbolic rape or a well-picturized, dramatic scene.

Rape was just another part of the script, one of the many scenes for me in the film. But all of us actors knew that we had to rehearse the scene well with the camera in position, so that we didn't waste time in putting the scene together while shooting. I had to remind my professional self to emote enjoyment while forcing myself on the actress. I had to tell myself several times that I was there to have fun at her cost.

No heroine has ever declined to work with me. By the '80s I had been in the industry for almost twenty-five years and achieved a certain standing. Of course, some heroines weren't

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professional or cooperative to start with, but they all had to buckle down to the director finally. However, the most cooperative star I've ever worked with is Hema Malini. She was a surprise. When I first worked with her I used to wonder how she would be able to do such scenes, for she appeared totally disinterested during rehearsals. The final shot was always fantastic; she was probably saving her best for the last. One of my best rape scenes has been with her in *Aas Paas* and she was cooperation personified.

Another phenomenon was the replacement of the vamp by the heroines opting to perform item numbers. Earlier the heroine was always a 'sati-savitri', so the vamp was necessary. But today's actresses have no such qualms. So why waste time on a vamp, when the leading lady is game?

The heroine realized the necessity of changing with time. The leading ladies of the '80s like Kimi Katkar and Sonam were extremely cooperative and professional about enacting any kind of scene, and that is what focus and direction are all about. But I always feel that the earlier heroines such as Hema, Rekha, Asha Parekh, Mumtaz and Sharmila Tagore were so much more professional.

The 'villain' in films comes clothed in many forms. I will give you an example. Years ago I had to perform a rape scene with a character in a film; incidentally, the director was smitten with this girl. I was trying to get on with my act and each time the director would interrupt to demonstrate 'his way' of doing it. This went on several times and I found out much later that the two were having an affair. Villain…who?

Then there was this top heroine who was having an affair with a top hero. A shot required me to kiss her and initially she was willing. However, her lover happened to be on the sets when we were ready to shoot and he kept signalling to her not to comply. So whenever I came close to her face she would turn away. This went on, take after take, until I mock-shouted, 'What the hell! We villains get thrown off cliffs, get shot by kids and beaten up by all the heroes. At least we should be able to enjoy small benefits.' It made light of the moment. Finally the shot was taken and the director heaved a sigh of relief.

I could have named these girls, but they are happily married to someone else today.

Most of the films of that time never showed the actual act; it was left to be conveyed through objects and sound effects. Like *Aas Paas*, where the hint of rape is only through dialogue, after which I leave a hundred-rupee note in an empty alcohol bottle while Hema Malini lies with dishevelled clothes. The music takes over.

Do you think I actually like doing all these dirty things on screen? No, I do not! Violence and sex may be phases of the contemporary scene but I am totally against glorifying violence or dishing out sex as a box office booster.

By the mid-1970s, film producers had already been told by the government to reduce violence and rape scenes. Even the films that were already on the floor had to conform by the new directive from the centre.

People thought I was one of the coolest rapists to have ever graced the Hindi film screen.

★

Picture this…I wear Coke-bottle glasses in *Andha Kanoon*, exactly a decade after *Daag*. I try to rape Reena Roy, who is wearing culottes that have all those ridiculous zippers. The goons have locked her in the house when she sees me. The dialogues go something like this…

Reena Roy, screaming at me in particular, bangs on the door: *Darwaza kholo*! (Open the

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door!)

PC laughs menacingly: *Bhagwaan bhala kare jab tak main nahin kahoonga, darwaza koi nahin kholega.* (No one will open the door until I say so.)

More dialogue follows and then my laughter rings out menacingly while I proceed to rip open her zippers, two on each calf, one each on the arms. The sound effect of the zippers is exaggerated while she keeps screaming '*Naheeeeein*'. Nothing is actually shown. The audience is kept on edge only by imagination.

The costume designer and the sound recordist had their work cut out to make this rape scene dramatic; for a change it went beyond Prem Chopra, 'the ripper'.

Unfortunately, the emphasis at that time was on the humiliation and suffering of the victim, who would die or commit suicide in the film. This treatment sent out wrong signals to society. Shame was attached to a rape victim instead of focusing on society's perversity (as perpetrators, bystanders, voyeuristic consumers and law makers).

Today the mood in our country has changed as the Nirbhaya case has been a wake-up call. With glaring media coverage and stringent laws, hopefully such crimes will be contained. Ironically rape is almost absent in films today, simply because people are exposed to titillation in other forms of media. In the '70s and '80s there was no cable, no Internet and even books were banned when found to be too bold.

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Losing my Father

My father passed away in the ’80s and after his death we, his children, fell out over matters of property. Paaji couldn’t see very well towards the end and we believe that he was made to sign a will favouring one brother and taking away my rights. My father could not betray me, could he? While the truth will always remain a question mark, the rest of us are in agreement that if he wanted to give away something that was rightfully mine, all he had to do was ask and I would have happily given it away. But not like this…not with this pain.

It broke a lot of hearts and there was a sense of betrayal. But that is life, and you learn to move on.

I have tried to make sense of this over the years, but failed to do so and have come to the conclusion that when it comes to matters of money there is no father, no brother. People stoop to any level.

Perhaps we are not alone. It is something that could happen in any family, and we are no exceptions.

How do you escape from it?

It is easier to forgive a stranger than your own. I have never recovered from this betrayal to date.

This is one dishoom that has scarred me for life.

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An interview with Prem Chopra (Star & Style, June 1989)

'Nothing is permanent here except me.'

In this interview I said,

> By the '90s I had seen the reign of two superstars, Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan. The Rajesh Khanna–Prem Chopra combination meant a sure hit those days. I had worked with the entire Kapoor clan from Prithviraj Kapoor to Rishi Kapoor with Dilip Kumar to youngsters like Govinda and Chunky. So you can say nothing is permanent here except me! And to think that I still have a long way to go, makes me feel great.
>
> The survival of an actor depends on how long the audience can tolerate him. Among the new breed of villains, Shakti and Amrish Puri have stayed for so long that it shows they have something in them. If they want to be here for a longer spell they should inject some variation into their roles. Survival otherwise is difficult. Now people are aware of the competition in the industry. With this the artistes become restless and they start feeling insecure. So the next thing they think they can do is to grab as many roles as possible and load themselves with more work. If they continue with the same tendency then they might not last as long as I did. The thing to do is, take little work and do full justice to it.

Soon after this interview, Amrish Puri became a permanent fixture in the Khan films. And I went on to my own set of films that did not feature the reigning Khans, though I did the random film with them. Essentially, I was part of other significant films with other actors that did well.

Yet in the '90s, I was still mouthing, '*Shemaroo, dhoond nikalo Gopalaa ko aasmaan se ya pataal se, hum usey dekhna chahte hain. Agar nahin mila toh tumhari botiyan noch daloonga* (Shemaroo, find Gopalaa whether he's in heaven or hell, I want to see him. If you don't find him I'll tear you to pieces)!'

The dialogue writing hadn't changed too much in the early '90s.

I had been playing the same character since *Bobby,* almost thirty years ago. Okay, so I had been doing some comic variations. I thought I was good at it! I got it right the first time, and just kept doing it again and again. The sly smile that immediately tells you I'm only after 'one thing', that palm rubbing the imaginary stubble on my jaw, the foxlike cunning in my voice, the deliberately slow dialogue delivery that only slightly increases in speed when I am mad, retaining the menace.

With Salman Khan I did *Jaagruti* (1993), *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* (2001) *and Saawan… The Love Season* (2006) and started work on *Bulund,* which was shelved. *Zamaana Deewana* (1995) and *Baadshah* (1999) were with Shah Rukh Khan. Besides these, I did not work with the

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Khans, who were ruling in the ’90s. Aamir and I never worked as co-actors, but I remember him as an assistant on the *Manzil Manzil* (1984) sets. All the same, at least one film of mine was a top grosser every year.

Films of mine that did well in the ’90s were *Police Public* (1990), *Phool Bane Angaarey* (1991), *Tahalka* (1992), *Khiladi* (1992), *Bewaffa Se Waffa* (1992), *Aaj Ka Goonda Raaj* (1992), *Raja Babu* (1994), *Gupt: The Hidden Truth* (1997), *Dulhe Raja* (1998), *Baadshah, Hindustan Ki Kasam* (1999) and *Anari No. 1* (1999).

I adapted to the new order, never giving up and maintaining a consistent release count. With that, I never disappeared from public memory.

Having been around for three decades, by now I was doing remakes with the new generation. *Aag Ka Gola* (1990), a remake of *Himmat*, was one such film. While Sunny Deol played the character Jeetu played in *Himmat*, I reprised my role with just a change in name (‘Boss’ to ‘Raja Babu’).

Police Public, one of the earlier hits of that decade, featured Naseeruddin Shah and Raaj Kumar. Raaj Kumar had set timings for shooting as he was undergoing treatment for cancer. He had to finish his work later. It was a murder mystery. Soon after, we also co-starred in *Betaaj Badshah* (1994), *God and Gun* (1995) and *Jawab* (1995). Only the last film did well.

Rakesh Roshan and Sujit Kumar joined hands to make *Khel* (1991), which was shot in Nairobi. Hrithik was assisting his father at this point. Uma and the kids joined me too. Anil Kapoor and I were staying in the same cottage till my family joined me and we bonded very well. Once Anil told Rakita, ‘Your dad is a very simple man.’ She replied, ‘I know, but how did you know?’ He said, ‘We’ve been staying together, we have spent quality time, I know.’

Some light-hearted songs were also picturized on me around this time. One with Kader Khan in *Princess from Kathmandu* (1992) went: ‘Main hoon Kader Khan, yeh hai Prem Chopra’. Another track that was quite popular was in *Mast Kalandar* (1991), with Anupam Kher playing a gay man lusting for me.

Phool Bane Angaray was a significant film, directed by K.C. Bokadia. Rajnikanth dies in the interval, after which the story revolves around Rekha and me. We shot this film in Udaipur and the entire city was out for a car rally scene. People screamed, ‘*Jab tak suraj chand rahega …*’ Observing my popularity, some politicians came to my room the next morning, requesting me to stand for elections. I politely declined.

Screen reviewed, ‘Prem Chopra as Bishamber Prasad gets a lot of footage and more than justifies it.’

Another K.C. Bokadia film that Rajnikanth and I worked in was *Tyagi* (1992). We shot the film in Chennai. It was the remake of a Tamil movie also featuring Rajnikanth.

After three decades of my career-defining film *Woh Kaun Thi*, I worked with N.N. Sippy once again in *Aaj Ka Goonda Raaj* (1992). It was Chiranjeevi’s first Hindi film. I found him humble and hardworking, quite unlike the film people one normally meets. My dialogue was very popular; it went along these lines, ‘*Tum Madhuri se thodi zyada, aur Mandakini se thodi kam ho; tum bandook se thoda zyada ho, tope se thoda kam; hum log yamdoot se thode zyada hain, bhagwaan se thode kam; hum saap se thodey zyada hain, nevley se thodey kam* (You’re a little better than Madhuri, a little less than Mandakini; you’re a little better than a gun, a little less than a bomb; I’m a little better than Yamdoot, a little less than God; I’m a little better than a snake, a little less than a mongoose).’

Another film that had a popular one-liner by me was Saawan Kumar Tak’s *Bewaffa Se Waffa*, ‘*Main ajghar ko bhi nigal sakta hoon* (I can even swallow a python).’ It is dialogues such as these

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that makes commercial Hindi cinema popular. My character's name was also Ajghar Khan. It was a comic villainous role which was much appreciated.

Santaan (1993) finally saw Jeetu playing the hero's father while I played the heroine's father. I was thrilled that we were playing the same generation together again after a stint in the middle, that had me playing father to his love interest! It was directed by Dasari Narayana Rao.

The other film that we did together the same year was *Aasoo Bane Angaarey*. Our professional association had now spanned almost twenty-five years, beginning with *Waris* in 1969. It had been a long innings for both of us.

Another co-actor with whom I had worked for a similar length of time was Bindu; we started with *Do Raaste* in 1969 and now we were together once again in *Aasoo Bane Angaarey* (1993).

Phool Aur Angaar (1993) starred Mithun. It did well; I was cast as Natwarlal, the gangster don. I had to wear blue lenses, which took quite a lot of time to fix. I resented it—as I mentioned earlier, I prefer to highlight villainy through my acting skills. But I added a lot of dialogues that were included and appreciated to my great satisfaction.

Since these three films, *Phool Bane Angaarey*, *Aasoo Bane Angaarey* and *Phool aur Angaar* had similar names, the joke amongst the press was, 'Prem Chopra is walking on angaarey [embers] these days.'

Khiladi (1992) was directed by Abbas Mastan. It was a big hit and succeeded in bringing Akshay Kumar into the limelight. The directors were hard-working and very meticulous in their planning. After every shot they would look at each other and their editor brother to ensure that all of them were satisfied. I felt very happy to see the affinity among them. I later did *Baadshah* and *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* with them.

The nineties saw the launch of two producer–directors' sons: Raj Kumar Kohli's son, Armaan Kohli, in *Virodhi* (1992) and Mohan Kumar's son, Rohit Kumar, in *Aazmayish* (1995). Both films sunk without a trace.

Kshatriya (1993), a J.P. Dutta film, had an all-star cast. Sunil Dutt and Dharmendra played fathers to their real-life sons, Sanjay Dutt and Sunny Deol, respectively. We shot in Bikaner. J.P. Dutta and I never worked together again.

In *Jaagruti*, I played Karisma Kapoor's father. She was the first of the fourth generation of Kapoors that I was worked with. The film did not do well. Karisma and I were also together in David Dhawan's *Raja Babu* along with Govinda. This was a blockbuster.

In 1995, I entered the small screen with *Andaz*, where I had a double role. I was one of the first silver-screen actors to attempt television and the pay per day was unheard of at the time. I would just mention an incredible fee and wouldn't expect the producer to agree. But they did, which was unexpected. Himesh Reshammiya was both producer and music director. The first episode of the series opened with me and Rajendra Kumar.

I didn't do a lot of TV serials as I did not enjoy the process. I found it very hectic. However, I am always game for special episodes, like the ones I did for *CID* ('The Case of the Counterfeit Murderer', 2001) and *Malini Iyer*, with Sridevi in the title role.

Two other films that did well during this time were *Laadla* (1994) where I played the textile-mill owner Suryadev, who is out to eliminate his competition, and *Ab Insaf Hoga* (1995), which starred Mithun Chakraborty and Rekha. Since the latter was about a woman's fight against corruption, it received tax exemption.

In *Gupt*, a Rajiv Rai film, I played a politician. This was the norm in the '90s. The villain, till then a smuggler, had graduated into the villain-politician. My association with Trimurti films had

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stood the test of time. I had worked in Gulshan Rai's *Dream Girl* and *Trishul* in the '70s. *Gupt* was one of the biggest successes that year.

Hindustan Ki Kasam, Dulhe Raja and *Anari No. 1* (1999) did well during this time. *Dulhe Raja*'s one-liner became very popular: '*Nanga nahayega kya aur nichorega kya.'*

Hindustan Ki Kasam was Veeru Devgan's first film as producer and director. I knew him from the time he was an assistant before he went on to become an action director. We shared a good rapport and when he made this film he said, 'I want Prem for this role.'

I had superb camaraderie with my action directors. In fact, I spent a lot of time exclusively with them rather than the usual dance directors, for obvious reasons. There is an interesting anecdote about M.B. Shetty, who was a very popular action director in the '60s and '70s, a towering personality and totally bald. He and I did a lot of films together, like *Teesri Manzil, Latt Saheb, Jhuk Gaya Aasman, BeImaan* and *Kati Patang*. In one of my first films, *Aamne Saamne,* we developed a close bond and were constantly pulling each other's leg. Our pranks became popular in the industry.

During the *Aamne Saamne* schedule, we (Shetty, Suraj Prakash the director and I), would play teen-patti (a three-card game, like flash) after work. One evening, I was on a streak of luck and managed to win against Shetty. Suddenly Shetty turned to the director and said, 'Suraj-ji, tomorrow's scene is to have Shashi Kapoor hanging down, but I think I will change it and have Prem hanging down.' I kicked Shetty under the table and meekly returned the money he had lost. And I was rewarded when he said, 'No! I think we will keep to the original idea and only have Shashi Kapoor hanging down.'

I enjoyed the films that I did and I shared a good relationship with almost all units. They would clamour to hear stories of my struggling days when I used to live in a small place behind the Taj Intercontinental. If anyone asked me where I lived, I would softly mumble 'behind' and loudly proclaim 'Taj', insinuating that I stayed at the Taj!

David Dhawan recalls

There are few legends, like Pran saab and then Prem-ji. They played characters and got into the skin of them. He is an outstanding person and a thorough gentleman. Always smiling, he is a pleasure for any director. He is easy and doesn't give any pressure to the filmmaker. You give him a scene and he adds his own bit and surprises you. In *Raja Babu* he added that extra something to his part. Yet he never imposes on you. He works simply as he is the sort of actor you cannot ignore. His dialogue delivery is superb. You give him a punchline and the way he says it…you are made. Who can forget his *Prem naam hai mera*. Recently I saw *Golmaal 3* and he played a wonderful cameo. I simply loved that scene.

Significant and top grossing films of the '90s:
Police Public (1990), *Phool Bane Angaarey* (1992), *Tehelka* (1992), *Khiladi* (1992), *Aaj Ka Goonda Raj* (1994), *Raja Babu* (1997), *Gupt* (1998), *Dulhe Raja* (1999), *Baadshah* (1999), *Hindustan Ki Kasam* (1999), *Anari No 1* (1999).

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Headline of a Hindi newspaper in the ’90s: ‘*Filmi Image Se Pareshan*’ (Trapped by his on-screen image). The article went on to say that Prem Chopra had daughters of marriageable age, but no proposals were forthcoming because the father’s reputation preceeded him. Hence, though the girls were ‘wife’ material their chances of going to a ‘good’ house were marred.

My daughters proved the paper wrong. Punita was the first to be married. She met Vikas Bhalla just before she joined college and he wooed her during their time together in Narsee Monjee College. I believe he would sing songs for her on stage and look at her while singing. To his credit, he made sure the families were part of their relationship from the beginning. He invited Uma and me to his parents’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. They were close friends of Uma’s nephew Prem Kishen and his wife Sunita. Prem Kishen has always maintained that not only am I his favourite uncle but also his friend, philosopher and guide and he is confident of my support for him at all times. Life is a two-way street; Prem means as much to me. Consequently, Prem and Sunita were instrumental in our getting to know the Bhallas better. We became very friendly over a period of time and it was understood that since the kids had made up their minds, they would marry.

Punita and Vikas were officially engaged for two years and were married after Vikas’s first music album *Awaara* was released in 1996. Our first grandchild Sanchi was born in 1999.

Prerana too started going out with Sharman Joshi right from her college days, though Uma and I got to know much later. Initially we were apprehensive, as we wanted to be sure that he could support her. Once again, another daughter and her beau sought our approval. I came around much before my wife did. And once she did, all preparations were in full swing and Prerana was married in June 2000.

The year 2000 saw two of our daughters getting married. I knew Rahul’s father, Gulshan Nanda—we had worked together in several films. Rakita and Rahul were married in December 2000.

Gulshanji’s wife Padma Nanda was always Bhabhi to us, and continued to be so even after Rakita’s marriage. When Padma told her relatives that her son Rahul was engaged to Prem Chopra’s daughter Rakita, her older sister was visibly agitated: ‘You mean you couldn’t find anyone else?’ Bhabhi tried hard to convince her: ‘Prem Chopra is an actor; he is not like that in real life.’ But her sister stood her ground insisting that ‘having worked in four hundred films as a villain, something must surely have rubbed off’.

Padma bhabhi told Uma once, ‘I am impressed that you treat all three samdhis with the same amount of respect. No more, no less; everyone’s equal. That is commendable.’

I think Uma must have been collecting jewellery for the girls ever since they were born. She had planned well in advance and made necessary provisions over the years. It is entirely due to her that the weddings were celebrated without us feeling the pinch.

Ironically, *Beti No. 1,* which released the same year as my daughters’ weddings, was about wanting only sons. I had a powerful dialogue in the end, ‘A son is a son till he gets a wife, but a daughter is a daughter till the end of life.’

How do you feel when your daughters get married? I have three

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daughters, and at each wedding my heart broke seeing them leave home. Doli is a very emotional time. Questions run through your mind, 'How will she adjust? Will she be able to live there happily? Will those people treat her well?'

All my daughters adjusted beautifully into their homes and are very happy. I am extremely lucky that they live in our vicinity. We meet each other almost every day, allowing for those frequent little interactions that make life sweet.

Thus, the new millennium saw me freed from my responsibilities. My girls were all married. It was just Uma and I at home.

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The next decade brought us much joy with our grandkids. Punita had Veer after Sanchi, Prerana had Khyana and then the twins, Vaaryan and Vihaan, and Rakita had Risha. All the children with the exception of Sanchi are close in age and they love to come to our house Nibbana to play. It is picnic time for all and Nana and Nani spoil them by giving them sweets. Once when Sanchi was small she was asked, ‘What does your Nana do?’ She replied, ‘*Nana chocolate detey hain* (Nana gives chocolates)!’ That was it, she saw me with no other work or identity except this.

Now the five younger grandkids line up for their Fox sweets. They are allowed only one, but Vaaryan always comes back on the sly for a second.

The three-year-old twins Vaaryan and Vihaan start a boxing match with me and when I scream for help, it is invariably Risha, the strong one, older than them by a couple of months, who runs to my rescue and tries to ‘save’ me from them.

Risha’s mother, Rakita, has also always been the strong one. Uma had entrusted the kids with the responsibility to make sure their father would not indulge in eating sweets, as he had to remain fit and handsome for his profession. I knew of this fatwa, but I love my sweets. Punita, aged eight, and Prerana, then six, would see me quietly helping myself to sweets and come running, dropping everything in trying to push me away from the sweets. I would pretend to resist and indulge in a mock wrestle with them, till they turned serious and called for reinforcement in the form of Rakita, who was ten years old then. She would charge into the fray and they would all combine to stop me from bingeing on sweets.

Saturday lunch is a mela. My daughters and grandchildren come for lunch, a trend started by Rakita. My sons-in-law also try to be a part of the ritual, but more often than not they are busy with work.

Life has turned full circle. The fun that I used to have with my daughters I now have with my grandchildren. When my daughters swallowed some seeds while eating watermelons, I would pretend that I could see a tree growing out of their ears. They would run to the mirror and check. Now I do the same with the grandkids and elicit the same reactions. They are pure, innocent and will believe what you tell them. Power always comes with responsibility.

When my grandkids watch my old films where I looked ‘young and dashing’, they refuse to believe that it is Nana on the screen. Their refrain is, ‘But this is not Nana, Nana is bald!’

Rakita was watching one of my movies the other day and my granddaughter Risha, who is five years old, saw a scene or two with her. Rakita tried to introduce her daughter to her Nana in the movies. After a while Risha asked her mother, ‘Is Nana a bad man?’ looking totally confused. It was déjà vu as Rakita explained to her child, ‘This is just acting. He is an actor. He is playing this role but you know him, he is not bad.’ I believe Risha just nodded very thoughtfully. Her next concern was that Nana was getting hurt, but she managed to be mollified when her mother told her that it was all playacting; actors don’t get hurt.

Recently I missed a step in a suburban theatre and hurt the area near my eye. Risha was thoroughly confused at the Bad Actor’s act.’ And so began a round of explanations

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of the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’!

★

People often ask me what it’s like to be Prem Chopra?

Well, Prem Chopra is two people rolled into one, one that you see on screen and the other, which my near and dear ones see off-screen. While on-screen I am a multitude of mainly evil characters, off-screen, I’m a caring husband, a loving father with three beautiful daughters, a concerned father-in-law and a doting grandfather. A very normal man!

My eldest daughter Rakita was a web and graphics designer and used to work with her husband Rahul, but after Risha’s birth she has chosen to operate from home and pursue another interest—writing. Punita runs an innovative preschool, nursery and activity centre called Windchimes for toddlers. Prerana runs an art portal named Samsara Art, and I have spent a number of evenings at her dos with various artists.

My favourite area in my home is the corner wall in the sitting room that displays a collection of awards and trophies and a collage of family pictures. A classic melange—the actor and the family man.

When I am not shooting, a normal day for me includes going to Jogger’s Park for a walk or a swim at Otters Club, catching up with close friends, reading or watching films. I read all kinds of books and I’m particularly fond of autobiographies.

Uma and I love watching movies and often go to film festivals. I enjoy both Hollywood and world cinema. If I have spent time watching a good movie, it is time well spent. Whenever there is a film festival, you will always find me there watching all genres of films. If you want to understand the culture of a country, then you should see a film from that place.

I have spent several holidays with all my sons-in-law. Rahul and Rakita went with Uma and me in Mauritius for the Zee Cine Awards. Punita and Vikas have done several Canada trips with us while Prerana and Sharman have accompanied us to London for the Zee Cine Awards and Norway for a film festival, in which I was being honoured with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Even though Sharman’s movie *Ferrari ki Sawari* (2013) was not complete, both of them came along. We went for a special cruise, stopping at Kiel, Oslo and Bergen in Germany with everything organized online by Sharman.

I am not very good with the online world and I am amazed to see even my three-year-old grandkids using the iPad as if it were a simple game meant for toddlers.

The new generation sends emails, which is definitely a better and faster way to be connected. Though I struggle to understand technology, I have an iPad and manage to check my emails and reply instantly. Recently, my daughter opened an account on Facebook for me and patiently explained the wonder of it all.

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Today I am doing more senior citizen roles; villainous roles are fewer in number. But adrenalin still flows when I face the camera—my personal gauge of happiness over the years. This does not mean that I did any and every film that came my way. Often, I have accepted a smaller role because it meant a definite presence on screen instead of sharing space with five villains in one frame. For instance, the three scenes in *Bunty aur Babli* fetched me more phone calls than a lot of other work I had done.

The significant films I did during this time were *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* (as the jolly family doctor), *Koi…Mil Gaya* (made by my close friend Rakesh Roshan), *Umar* (2006) (as one of the three old protagonists), *Dhamaal* (2007) (in the cameo of the rich man who triggers the plot), *Delhi-6* (2009) as the Lala and *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* as Ranbir Kapoor's indulgent but principled grandfather.

Chori Chori Chupke Chupke, starring Salman Khan, was directed by Abbas–Mustan and produced by Bharat Shah. It was a hit. But it got mired in controversy and the actors were frequently questioned by the CBI. Luckily, I was never subjected to this.

Koi… Mil Gaya was my first film with Hrithik as an actor. I had seen him work on the sets of *Khel*; he was assisting his dad at the time. He has grown up into a fine man.

★

Rakesh Roshan on Prem Chopra

When we worked together in *Koi…Mil Gaya*, Prem had to say this dialogue, '*Aaj main do din ki chutti announce karta hoon* (Today I announce a two-day holiday)'. His dialogue delivery had us all in splits. Everybody continued to ask him when he was announcing the next holiday. He has lived every character he played, whether negative or positive, because he does a lot of homework before he comes on to the set.

Hrithik Roshan on Prem Chopra:

Prem Uncle exudes so much love whenever I meet him or speak with him...and that affection is so deep-rooted that I am certain it is the sum total of all the love I received from him in my childhood. Knowing him as a person, and as such a rare and incredible actor who can effortlessly portray a plethora of characters across the spectrum, has time and again inspired me and helped me grow as an actor myself.

He is so kind and so genuinely affectionate to me and God alone knows how great he has made me feel every time he calls to compliment or congratulate me. He is an example of greatness with

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humility. He inspires goodness in all our hearts.

★

I had a small role in *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara* (2005). It turned out to be a precursor for *Broken Thread* (2007), an American film, as the casting director saw the rushes and signed me up to play Vashishta, a holy man.

Amitabh and I were co-starring in films even after thirty years. During this time we did *Hindustan Ki Kasam, Hum Kaun Hai* (2004) and *Viruddh…Family Comes First* (2005), the last film produced by his company ABCL.

I did *Bunty aur Babli* with his son, Abhishek Bachchan. This was a hit film. I played a sardar truck driver in a special appearance. It was much appreciated by friends, family and fans. I also played a sardar in *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year*.

Umar was another film with a promising theme, where I had a substantial role. My track was about an elderly parent who is abused by his children.

In *Dhamaal* I had only one scene in the beginning of the movie. After the movie released, I met a ten-year-old child in Otters Club. She asked me, 'Uncle, how did you give away ten crore?' I asked her, 'Did you want it?' She nodded. I was quick to reply, 'Oh! I wish I had known. I could have given it to you instead!' She believed me. The film was very popular with that age group.

Salaam-e-Ishq (2007) was a multi starrer. I played Gia's (Ayesha Takia) father, Col Bakshi. She is in love with Shiven Dungarpur (Akshaye Khanna) and both are to be married shortly when Shiven develops cold feet and disappears from her life. Col Bakshi has no alternative but to arrange Gia's marriage elsewhere. The film was declared a flop in India though it was a hit overseas. *Patiala House* (2011) for Nikhil Advani followed, where I had a guest appearance. Soon after this film I did the voice-over of Kaalia the Hyena for Nikhil in *Delhi Safari* (2012)—the film won the National Award for best animation.

Just as work was picking up, I had an accident and injured my right leg. I was scheduled to film for *Money Hai Toh Honey Hai* (2008) in Mauritius and had to step back for a while. However, since Ganesh Acharya, the director, remained insistent that I do the role, my portion was shot later in Mumbai. I was shooting for *Delhi-6* at the time in Jaipur and had to come back to finish this film.

While I was recuperating from my leg injury, I also shot for *Daddy Cool* (2009), an official remake of *Death at a Funeral*. This role was tailor-made for me under the circumstances as I had to sit on a wheelchair throughout the film. My performance was appreciated. *Film Information* critiqued, 'Prem Chopra is splendid. As the perpetually irritated Uncle Murphy, he evokes a lot of laughter.' Another critic gave an extra star for an 'inspired act by Prem Chopra'.

An actor always needs to be appreciated. It's never enough. You need that reassurance. It's a great feel-good factor.

When Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra approached me for *Delhi-6*, I was gung-ho about my part of Lalaji, the none-too-scrupulous moneylender. The entire set of Chandni Chowk used throughout the film was put up at Sambar village in Rajasthan, but my accident had the doctors advising me not to travel. I decided to back out of the project, but Rakeysh Mehra said, 'We will wait.' As luck would have it, the schedule was postponed to a time when I was back on my feet. We shot in Sambar village for over four months and the hospitality was splendid. The arrangements were immaculate and the security excellent. Unfortunately, the film wasn't a winner, even though so much hard work had gone

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into it.

Even after fifty years in the industry, I am as nervous and excited as a newcomer about the box office outcome of my films. The other day, when I completed a shot effortlessly, I think I surprised myself the most. Even today, I continue to work at improving myself. It keeps me ticking. You also need a constant reality check. I have seen most top actors surrounded only by 'yes' men, and when their downfall came everyone vanished, leaving them lonely.

The decade ended with *Golmaal 3*, where I appear in a flashback segment. I was to behave like the yesteryear loud villain. It was a hilarious role and much appreciated. The film was a big hit, a member of the exclusive 100-crore grossing club.

Other films that I did during this period were *Loot* (2011), and *Mirch* (2010). In the latter, I play the maharaja of Bikaner, married to a young bride played by Konkona Sen Sharma. This film was critically acclaimed.

In Sriram Raghavan's *Agent Vinod* (2012), co-starring Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor, I played the big bad villain. In order to learn my dialogues effectively, I would ask for a translation of the dialogues in Moroccan Arabic so that I could emote well. The locals were ecstatic with my scenes. They said, 'You speak better Moroccan than the people residing here.'

It was nice working with Saif and Kareena. Both are mature, hard-working and involved actors. I had worked with Saif in the beginning of his career. He has improved tremendously and become a seasoned actor, a superstar in the true sense. Kareena Kapoor is a spontaneous actress. She grasps her character flawlessly and manages to stay in it all the time.

Salim Khan once complimented me, 'Whoever has come in contact with Prem Chopra has always had positive things to say about him.'

Maybe it's just this positivity, added to intrinsic talent and consistent hard work, that allowed me to complete five decades and enter the sixth.

Significant films I did in the 2000s

Chori Chori Chupke Chupke (2001), *Koi...Mil Gaya* (2003), *Hum Kaun Hai* (2004), *Viruddh* (2005), *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara* (2005), *Umar* (2006), *Dhamaal* (2007), *Salaam E Ishq* (2007), *Money Hai Toh Honey Hai* (2008), *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* (2009), *Daddy Cool* (2009), *Delhi 6* (2009), *Golmaal 3* (2010), *Mirch* (2010), *Loot* (2011), *Agent Vinod* (2012)

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Rakita went to Amritsar recently. When people discovered that my daughter was staying there, they turned up en masse to talk at her hotel to her. Their explanation was simple—I was family to the people of Punjab!

Punjabi cinema, by this time, had also started looking up. I signed a Punjabi film, *Dharti* (2011). It was a super hit and I was happy with my role as the president of a political party. I had started off my film career with a Punjabi film—*Chaudhary Karnail Singh*—and the wheel had turned five decades later.

Thanks to *Dharti,* I observed that Punjabi films were coming up in a big way and had a huge market in Canada, Australia, the US, the UAE and the UK. I was amazed by the figures. Punjabi films were big and could make a lot of money.

Recently *Dharti*'s director signed me up for another film where I am to play three generations—father, grandfather and great-grandfather.

At the Punjabi Virsa Awards 2011, where I was honoured with the Lifetime Achievement Award, a trailer of *Dharti* was played. I was knocked off my feet, though, when the organizers also screened a short clip from *Sapni,* released in 1965. Two Punjabi films, forty-five years apart, starring Prem Chopra!

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Straddling Hindi and Punjabi cinema as I was, it wasn't long before international films came calling. I went international with a few English films like *Honour Killing, Broken Thread* and *Heart Land* (2012).

Heart Land, directed by the Emmy-winning director Fred Holmes, is about a sardar whose grandson is settled in New York. The grandson wants to marry an American girl and comes to Ludhiana to get my approval. In the process of getting to know the girl, I find her simple and very much like us.

I also did an Indo–UK film, *Honour Killing*, where I kill my own daughter and come out of jail a reformed man. The film traces the story of three friends, a Britisher, a Pathan and a Sikh. The son of the Sikh falls in love with the daughter of the Pathan and despite their liberal ways of life, the families can't accept the liaison. Honour killing is said to be a way of life among communities in Britain. This film is a stark commentary on the atrocities. It was screened at the Berlin Indian Film Festival 2012.

In *Broken Thread* I play Vasishtha, a holy man who guides the protagonist's mind into the past so that he may sort out his present. The crew used Panavision cameras; it was a very well-made movie. The unit was extremely particular about punctuality. We were shooting in Simla in the winters and had to assemble at 4.45 a.m., and if you were not ready, you had to find your own way to the sets.

The American actor was surprised when he realized I had acted in over four hundred films. He said, 'This means that you cannot incorporate changes in your hair or looks. In Hollywood we change looks in keeping with the role; and it definitely looks more natural.'

We have been used to making do with wigs and generally working on a couple of films at a time. Not much attention was paid to such details, though the new generation has changed all that.

This unit convinced me to shave off my hair. I took the plunge in London, with Uma by my side. We decided not to tell the children. We wanted to see their reactions. I went with this new look to the club where all my friends reacted positively. Everyone seemed to love the bald pate, especially Rakesh Roshan.

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Working with Generations

It was when I worked with the two youngest Kapoors in the industry—Ranbir and Kareena—that I realized I had now worked with every Kapoor actor of the past four generations. It all began forty-seven years ago with *Sikander E Azam* in 1965, the latest addition to the list being *Agent Vinod* with Kareena in 2012.

Prithviraj Kapoor—*Sikander E Azam*
Raj Kapoor—*Bobby* (as director), *Do Jasoos, Gopichand Jasoos*
Shammi Kapoor—*Teesri Manzil, Latt Saheb, Pagla Kahin Ka, Desh Premee, Hukumat, Betaab, Ajooba, Tehelka, Prem Granth*
Shashi Kapoor—*Aamne Saamne, Do Musafir, Immaan Dharam, Trishul, Kaala Patthar, Kranti*
Randhir Kapoor—*Sawaal, Pukar*
Rishi Kapoor—*Bobby, Raja, Khel Khel Mein, Barood, Jhoota Kahin Ka, Dhan Daulat, Naseeb, Nagina, Ajooba, Prem Granth, Jai Hind, Delhi-6, Patiala House*
Rajiv Kapoor—*Preeti, Shukriyaa, Prem Granth* (as director)
Babita—*Doli, Anjaana*
Neetu Kapoor—*Waris* (as a child artist), *Khel Khel Mein, Maha Chor, Jhoota Kahin Ka, The Great Gambler, Dhan Daulat, Ek Aur Ek Gyarah, Kala Patthar*
Karisma Kapoor—*Jaagruti, Raja Babu, Jawab*
Kareena Kapoor—*Agent Vinod*
Ranbir Kapoor—*Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year*

Besides the Kapoors, I have worked with other father–mother– son–daughter teams.

- Veeru Devgan, Ajay Devgn
- M.B. Shetty, Rohit Shetty
- Amitabh Bachchan, Abhishek Bachchan
- Rajesh Khanna, Twinkle Khanna
- Dharmendra, Sunny Deol, Bobby Deol
- Gulshan Rai, Rajiv Rai
- Sunil Dutt, Sanjay Dutt
- Vinod Khanna, Akshaye Khanna
- Sharmila Tagore, Saif Ali Khan
- Nutan, Mohnish Behl
- Rakesh Roshan, Hrithik Roshan

The list is endless!

Recently I joked with Ranbir, 'When you have kids I will work with them also.'

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★

Randhir Kapoor on Prem Chopra

He is a great actor and a terrific co-star. He is the most wonderful actor that I have ever worked with. A wonderful human being, it is a privilege that I am a part of his family.

Rajiv Kapoor on Prem Chopra

I remember going to Sun-n-Sand for his wedding in 1969. I was still a kid [and] I used to be scared when I saw him. Often he would come home and I would sit somewhere else and wonder why this villain had come. I would wait for him to go. Once I grew up, and I was directing him in my first film, he asked, 'How do you want me to play this role?' I told him, 'You tell me how you are going to do it!'

He is a good buddy and always encourages. Such people are not born again. I try to copy his line [with my name] 'Mera naam hai Chimpoo, Chimpoo Kapoor', but the punch is not there when I say it.

He is the greatest ever villain who is the biggest comedian in [real] life. Such a happy man and spreads such joy.

Kareena Kapoor on Prem Chopra

It's been an honour to work with him in two of my movies—*Golmaal 3* and *Agent Vinod*. He's a legend and one of the pillars of our industry. He is also related to our family and we are proud of his contribution to Hindi films. We would like him to entertain us for many more years to come.

Ranbir Kapoor on Prem Chopra

I have had the good fortune of working with Prem uncle in *Rocket Singh*. The nicest time I had with a co-star is in *Rocket Singh* because he has always been so warm, so encouraging. I have known him from the day I was born. He was Papa's closest friend. We all used to travel together. I remember an incident when we all had gone to Fiji Islands for a show together and I would keep asking Mom why everyone feared Prem uncle when he was sweet and so loving, like Santa Claus. Even his touch is full of warmth.

Even in my film *Ajab Prem Ki Ghazab Kahani* I have tried to copy him in that dialogue, 'Prem naam hai Mera, Prem Chopra'.

If you sit down to talk of Hindi films, Prem uncle is truly one of the most important pillars because of the kind of work he has done and the quality of work he has done. I also didn't know he was so educated and he reads so much.

To have worked with him and to know he has worked with every family member is definitely a privilege.

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Rishi Kapoor: In Conversation

Much before I decided to become an actor, I was mesmerized by the depiction of villainy by Pran saab, Jeevan saab and the likes. That was before the villain donned a new avatar in the guise of Prem Chopra. He was a tall, fair and good-looking Punjabi, great hero material who went on to become an even greater villain. For one, the breaks he got in memorable films like *Do Raaste, Upkar* and *Purab Aur Pachhim* all combined to define his path. All these characters were of a handsome man, well placed in society, with negative shades that set him apart. He caught the attention of all. Then one day I realized that my Maasi's baat pakki was done and she was getting married to this guy called Prem Chopra. Another actor in our family was welcome. Both my parents belonged to families of actors. And now we were to have a Massad who was none other than Prem Chopra; he became family.

My next memories are of his contribution to *Bobby*. Of course he was much senior to me in stature and career and I was very much in awe of him. But he was so comforting and a great individual. The best thing I liked about him was how malleable he was at the hands of the director, Raj Kapoor.

He was insecure about the role and would constantly seek reassurance from my Mama Premnath (his brother-in-law), 'I am working with Raj-ji and he tells me that I just have one dialogue, "*Prem naam hai mera.*" Do you think it will work?' Premnath soothed him, 'Raj knows his job, you just leave it to him. He will do what he has to do. Don't worry.'

Prem, unwilling to give up, requested Raj-ji to add just one more line to his dialogue, *'Yeh kya ho gaya* (What is this?).' He was firmly told, '*Sirf yeh bolo* (Just say this).'

The rest is history! The film became a huge success and his tagline became a legendary dialogue for him, for the film, for everybody. It was so simple…so effective.

Thereon, in spite of an age difference, I shared a great relationship, friendship and bond with Prem-ji. I was soon initiated into his circle of friends—Rakesh Roshan, Jeetendra and Sujit Kumar (all my seniors, of course). I was the youngest in this gang, the new kid on the block. Thereafter, I became a star, and Prem-ji and I starred in a lot of films together.

But the best thing about Prem Chopra is that despite his seniority, he always comes across on a personal basis. I remember even Ranbir saying, 'I am working with Prem-ji in *Rocket Singh*, he is so comfortable to work with, he doesn't give the feeling that he is so senior.' It is so commendable that he makes everybody comfortable so effortlessly; it is something I have learnt from him. It is important for actors to make their fellow colleagues feel relaxed and tension-free.

Another thing I love about Prem-ji is his easy camaraderie with his seniors and juniors. He displays the same love. But however friendly and however close our relationship, I have always been respectful with Prem-ji. I am not the back-slapping guy with him—I've always called him Prem-ji.

We travelled a lot together; in fact, I think we have almost always shot outdoors. Right from Fiji to America and Europe, we've shot in very exotic locations. The first time I did an outdoor with him was for a film called *Barood* in a place called Tignes in France. Prem-ji played the baddie of course, and the sequence required him to run me down with a snowmobile. Tignes is at a fairly high altitude and it is possible to be oxygen-depleted quite easily. Prem-ji was supposed to roll me over and continue to chase me when I suddenly realized that I wasn't breathing evenly because of the high

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altitude. I remember thinking that Prem-ji would not realize this and would drive the vehicle over me. There was enough distraction in the shot, a snowstorm blowing plus the roaring machine with which he was chasing me. But the seasoned actor immediately sensed there was something wrong with me; he stopped the snow machine instantly. I didn't say anything; it was probably a small thing for him. But you store such things in the back of your mind to remind you of the wonderful person you are lucky to know.

Another quality I like about Prem Chopra is his ability to make himself the butt of a joke. This is a rare quality—most people joke, but don't like to be the butt of jokes. Prem-ji loves to clown—he loves to make people laugh and keep them at ease. Social meetings are always relaxing with him around.

I am in the midst of a film with him right now and he called me up one day to say jocularly, 'Oh my God, *ab tere baap ka role karna padega, log kya sochenge mere age ke barey mein* (If I have to do your father's role now, what will people assume my age to be).' Talking about his age is taboo, so it is always great fun pulling his leg about it.

I used to speak to Prem-ji very often over the phone and if his maid would be at the other end, I would always give a false name. The maid started recognizing my voice after some time, but I continued with my spoof, using names like Abraham Lincoln, knowing fully well that Prem-ji would see through the farce immediately.

Prem-ji is a natural actor, however stylized he may sound when sneering at a woman. I have seen him practising his lines in Hindi, Punjabi and English, a trait he is believed to have learnt from Dilip Kumar. I can't seem to remember a single instance when Prem-ji has forgotten his lines. I have never seen him picking a quarrel with anybody or riding roughshod over another person's self-respect. He has never talked ill of any person in front of me. I don't think it is in his nature.

He was always a loving father to his three daughters. In 1986, we had gone for some shows to Fiji. Prem-ji was accompanied by his wife and daughters while I was there with my wife Neetu, and of course Riddhima and Ranbir who were tiny tots, besides Dimple and Asrani. It turned out to be one big family bonding time. And I saw for the first time how close he is to his children, how affectionate.

There are so many facets to him. Prem Chopra is of course a world renowned brand today. There are many actors who have done negative roles, but he stands apart because he has not resorted to any gimmicks except on rare occasions like *Kala Sona*, in which he sported a stone eye. He has done roles looking ordinary, yet exuding a chilling menace through his superlative talent.

These days my standard joke with him is that I started working with him when he had a head full of hair and I still work with him when he has a bald head.

I have a super equation with him and it is always a pleasure to work with him.

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Once a journalist asked Pran saab if he had moved beyond villainous roles because Prem Chopra had moved in. Pran saab in his inimitable way quipped, 'No! Prem Chopra could move in only because I moved on!'

Pran saab and I played a lot of father–son roles together in movies like *Purab Aur Pachhim* and *Anjaana*.

In *Anjaana*, I had a scene with Pran saab and Rajendra Kumar, where I introduce myself as Ramesh and Rajendra Kumar pretending not to hear, says, 'Chajozaada.' After that I was always Pran saab's Chajozaada. Whenever he would meet me he would say, 'Chajozaada, how are you?'

I was privileged to do so many films with him and know him as a person. I was invited to his book release and spoke of him on his ninetieth birthday. He was a very friendly person and we shared good affinity with each other. We always exchanged flowers on every occasion till the very end.

He was disciplined and punctual. In fact, his punctuality was the talk of the industry. If he was to be on the set by 9 a.m., he would make it a point to be there by 8.45 a.m. Even if he had been partying the whole night, it made no difference; he was always on time. He loved his life, he loved his drinks and he loved smoking. He enjoyed his life and lived every moment of it on his own terms. He was totally professional and extremely motivated when it came to his work.

Pinky, Pran saab's daughter, told me at her father's prayer meet that he was very fond of me.

Pinky Bhalla recalls

Every time my dad had a party or function he would say, '*Prem ko zaroor bula dena*.' I know Dad was very fond of him and always remembered him. When we talked about movies and villains or acting he always mentioned him. He would say that if there was anyone after him, it was Prem Chopra.

★

Change is the only constant in life. First it was Pran saab, then it was me, and then came the countless others before the heroes Shah Rukh Khan (*Darr*, 1993), Aamir Khan (*Dhoom 3*, 2013), Sanjay Dutt (*Khalnayak,* 1993) and Rishi Kapoor (*Agneepath,* 2012) became villains.

From playing a young revolutionary in his twenties in *Shaheed* in the '60s, I went on to play a father in the mid-1980s, and then a grandfather fifty years later in *Rocket Singh*.

The new generation always takes over and the old have to adapt or bid adieu.

In the earlier days, stories were based on heroes, heroines and the villain. The villain had to be negative with just a shade of grey in order to create conflict. Our presence was enough to create conflict on-screen.

The '70s villain was mean, he beat up and bullied people, stole from them, raped women; in short, just about everything negative. That is not to say we did meaningless roles; in fact, it was more

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of a challenge to play a 'typical villain' again and again. That is why I added my own little touches to the role in every film, I would speak in a slimy manner, or have a sadistic look on my face, operate in a silky-smooth and sly manner, spelling terror.

I began to experiment with my looks, clothes and body language with the thought that the villain could well have been a super ambitious man. Over a period of time, I became the lovable villain—the sort a girl would fall for before realizing what a big blunder she has committed. That made villains somewhat more believable over time.

Now I have two questions for you with respect to villainy in the '70s and '80s.

Do you recall any family relations of the characters I portrayed in films like *Trishul, Kaala Patthar* or *Dhan Daulat*? And was there ever a justification for me being a bad man?

My generation of villains appeared out of thin air. They had no father, mother, wife or children.

In that era, the movie comprised one main villain, the hero and heroine, plus a comedian. The whole plot revolved around these characters. A cabaret and a rape would be thrown in and the picture was complete. The poor antagonist was therefore shouldered with delivering a great deal of villainy within the shortest possible time in a most meaningless manner. Today, the concept of the villain has changed. The heroes play negative roles and their characters are always fleshed out credibly. Shah Rukh Khan, Sanjay Dutt, Rishi Kapoor and Amitabh Bachchan are some examples of the new type of villain.

It was the '80s that brought about this change in the villain and I have often felt it to be a change for the better. There were more shades to the character as compared to the coal-black villain of yesteryear. The flip side of this new phenomenon was the inclusion of several villains in a film. Once again, credibility was at stake as the villain would be reduced to a mere caricature with each actor elbowing out the other to make his presence felt. And yet, if you wished to survive, you had to follow the trend.

On a side note, such films bombed at the box office.

The roles like the ones I had in *Kati Patang, Do Raaste* and *Prem Nagar* were no longer being written in the '80s. And the reasons for this change cannot be attributed to the writer only; the public wanted it too. But the results—the nervous villain, the buffoon villain, the pleasant villain, etc., were appreciated by all.

Soon there was a growing imbalance between the hero and the villain. The villain had become a buffoon; he was easily beaten to pulp. The hero had started battling forty guys by this time and the villain just did not seem formidable enough. So a further dimension was given to the villain—political power—to restore the balance and make the hero's task more difficult.

Even today in many parts of the country, politicians are synonymous with corruption and lies. There are exposés on politicians in the newspapers and magazines, and people assume that where there's smoke, there must be fire.

Cinema has become the crucial mirror of political thinking in India. Even if you stop portraying politicians in this manner, you cannot forbid people from thinking about them in this way.

The South Indian films also did well in the '80s. The villain became the entertainer; villainy was reduced to a joke with the villain snarling angrily and the audience laughing. He was no longer a sinister character; the fear he used to evoke ended as the two-villain era came in. One villain provided the entertainment while the other went on with the business of villainy.

Gradually we witnessed the transition of the villain from desiring the heroine to being the hero or heroine's father opposing his children's romance.

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By the late ’80s and ’90s, everyone was out for a fast buck and quality took a back seat. In the ’60s and ’70s, when I started my career, it was important that the villain’s roles were as clearly defined as the hero’s. This is why my generation made such a mark.

The villain changed through the decades, reflecting the socioeconomic circumstances of each era. The ’50s munim gave way to the ’60s dacoit who stepped aside for the ’70s smuggler who fell by the wayside for the ’80s politician, who, to his credit, still reigns strong. Of course, in the new computer age we even have the robot cast as a villain. Power is the oppressor.

No matter how much villains were hated on screen, they were normal men outside the studios. They didn’t take off on murdering and raping sprees. In the late ’80s whilst seeing an episode of *Lehren* ‘Behind the Scenes’, I remember thinking that it was taking away the magic of cinema by revealing too much. The programme was the first of its kind in India. Today it is the norm to have a skeleton unit devoted to ‘the making of a film’, which is shot alongside the movie itself.

I like the present crop of actors. They change their appearance. They can do that since they are doing fewer films and also because films now are made within a short span of time. You start a film and in a few months you are through with it. Earlier it would take years for a film to be completed. Sometimes we would be doing ten films at a time. Today the system is more structured with directors mulling and discussing the entire project and putting everything in place before beginning to shoot. Things were different back then—we would shoot one schedule and it could easily take two or three months before we were called again. But that doesn’t mean our stories were not good; on the contrary, we had silver jubilees for our films, a milestone that is history now. Those days there was an obsessive passion in the art of making films. Today, commercial viability rules the roost, with the majority of films made accordingly and with the major chunk of earnings determined by takings on the first weekend.

The dynamics of the film industry have undergone a shift—actors blog and tweet to reach out to their fans. Whether being wheeled into an operation theatre, completing a shoot or having a day off, the actor is constantly updating his status. The fans have become, as per Amitabh, the extended family. Stars taking up celebrity causes, heroes and heroines flaunting their affairs—everything is media-centric.

Earlier we made our money only through our films and if you were business savvy you invested wisely. Now you can also make money in television and by ribbon cutting. In fact, there is more money to be made by hosting or judging a show than one would make in a film.

The only awards announced then each year (other than the National Awards) were the Filmfare Awards and it was a huge honour to receive the ‘Black Lady’. Over the years, more and more corporate houses initiated their own awards, along with huge ceremonies, tailor-made for television viewers. In the early years, a premiere or award function meant serious business for the actors. The turnouts were glittering, starry affairs. But as it happens in life, politics would often play the villain, with a disgruntled actor claiming that an award was bought. And then, in an anti-climax, when such a star actually received the award, he/she would be the most surprised, not having paid for it.

Today, frivolous matters have gained prominence at award functions. One becomes the butt of comperes and their ‘comic’ remarks if one is suited and booted and not on the nomination list. How about just celebrating success and being happy for the new order? Are we not all here for the love of cinema? To them I will say only this: let them first achieve what we did and let them evolve for their own sake and learn to be happy for their friends and collegues.

The directors of yesteryear were much more passionate, which is why they created classics that would be loved for centuries, like *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960), *Ganga Jamuna* (1961), *Awaara*

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(1951), *Upkar, Bobby*. They were obsessed with their films. Manoj Kumar, Yash Chopra and Raj Kapoor may not have paid their actors much, but if needed, would spend a hundred times more on a specific shot or sequence!

The common thread through the years has been the basic raw material—a good script. Armed with a strong script, it becomes easier to work on the other elements required to make an outstanding film. As mentioned earlier, the lack of a complete script also contributed to the delay in completing a film; nowadays, a film does not go on the floor until a bound script is in place. With professional organization being the order of the day, it takes much less time to shoot.

Today, even though 'negative roles' and 'gray shades' abound, the simple, old-fashioned villain has ceased to be a part of the Bollywood lexicon. Come to think of it, the paradox is that when life was simpler, more laid-back and nobler, we had zillions of bad guys setting the screen ablaze with their evil charm, but today when there are villains all around us in real life, our cinema doesn't have too many. The hero seems to double up for the good and the bad.

Yet some of those who have been passed the baton are doing a good job. Hrithik Roshan in *Dhoom 2* (2006) and Sanjay Dutt and Rishi Kapoor in *Agneepath* were some spellbinding performances of the hero-turned-villain.

The steady stream of releases in my career can be attributed to my ability to reinvent myself to combat with the changes in the industry. I nursed no illusions; I was practical. My daughter asked me once, 'Why don't you be choosy about your roles like Sharman?' I replied, 'Sharman is starting out; I know, I have been there, done that! I have a realistic overview of what I can get at this age. I like to work even if it is just a five- or six-day stint; I feel good. An actor has to keep working, it makes him feel alive.'

But this philosophy does not allow me to do just anything. *Agent Vinod* and *Rocket Singh* have reaffirmed my faith in myself. My instincts are still good; even after fifty years, the marvellous feedback I receive is proof enough. I have said 'no' to two-day roles where I would have been just one amongst the others, but I was fine with doing a cameo like the one I did in *Golmaal 3,* as that scene stands out. But in general, other guest appearances are out; I refuse to be part of a film that just has me standing around with the other characters.

One positive change in the film industry is the freedom from branding—no actor is fitted into a permanent slot. Today, there is more reality in the spoken lines, not the 'dialogue-baazi' that it was earlier. But there are exceptions as always, as seen in the Salman Khan films with each one making well over a hundred crore rupees and some almost touching two hundred crore rupees.

However, nothing beats the old world charm once in a while. In *Golmaal 3*, the scene that has most viewers in splits is between Mithun and me. I am his girlfriend's ameer baap who tries to ridicule and buy him off, à la the films of the '70s and '80s. This scene was one of the highlights of the 2010 blockbuster film.

Films with Pran

Shaheed (1965), *Around the World* (1967), *Upkar* (1967), *Anjaana* (1969), *Samaj ko Badal Dalo* (1970), *Yaadgaar* (1970), *Purab aur Pachhim* (1970), *BeImaan* (1972), *Jugnu* (1973), *Bobby* (1973) *Do Jhoot* (1975) *Des Pardes* (1978) *Jai Hind* (1999) *Bewafa se Wafa* (1992), Daata 1989 Indira 1989 *Mitti aur Sona* (1989) *Shukiryaa* (1989) *Shahenshah* (1988) *Gunahon ka Faisla* (1988) *Sarfarosh* (1985) *Duniya* (1984), *Souten* (1983), *Jaanwar* (1983), *Andhaa Kanoon* (1983), *Daulat ke Dushman* (1983), *Taqdeer ka Badshah* (1982), *Naseeb* (1981), *Dostana*

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(1980), *Dhan Daulat* (1980) *Do Musafir* (1978) *Jheel ke us Paar* (1973) *BeImaan* (1972) *Sanyasi* (1975) *Azaad Desh ke Ghulam* (1993)

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An actor's work is what makes his existence meaningful, and sometimes means much more than anything else in the world. Perhaps a bit harsh, but I think families need to understand this. For instance, wives of actors who don't know the industry tend to be jealous. My wife was from the industry, and being Raj Kapoor's sister-in-law and Premnath's sister, she proved to be a great asset in my career. She knew what films I was working on and came up with some amazing suggestions. And even while I rejected some of them, I never lost sight of how lucky I was to have an understanding wife.

Men who are not fortunate enough to get solace and companionship at home seek it elsewhere. My wife and I have got along so far by being the best of friends rather than simply being man and wife. I never needed to indulge in affairs. We have always had a number of other activities, which kept us busy. Probably the others have no activities, except working and lafdas. Well, there can be a fling here and there! But with the passing of time, a certain maturity must come into your life. If you can give up drinks or even cigarettes, then affairs can be laid aside too! My wife is intelligent, mature and level-headed. She even handles the business aspect of my profession expertly. What more can I ask for—we are truly a 'well-tuned' couple.

I can't take all the credit for my success. I owe my wife, my best critic, a considerable portion of it. She sees every film of mine and her review of my performance continues to be the last word. She comes from a family associated with the film industry and I value her judgement.

Her influence on the household is just as much. For instance, every Friday we eat only vegetarian food as she observes the 'Mata' fast. In fact, chana puri has been our standard lunch on Fridays for many years. Ketan Desai, assisting his dad during the making of *Mard,* would always come to meet me on Fridays in the hope of joining us for the chana puri lunch. Personally, I don't feel the need to visit temples as I do not believe in deity worship. I believe the best way to be with God is to be nice to people. But I respect my wife's religious beliefs.

While on the subject of spirituality, I was fascinated by the likes of Vinod Khanna, Vijay Anand and Mahesh Bhatt. They were different and though I had little interaction with Mahesh Bhatt, I spent a lot of time with Vinod and Goldie. I was curious to experience their spiritual source.

Vinod and I were shooting in Pune for *Adha Din Adhi Raat* (1977) in the mid-'70s. I played Shabana Azmi's father in it. Being curious about Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, I went with Vinod to the ashram to listen to him. I was quite fascinated by Rajneesh's clarity of thought—he was a great orator. He had dramatic views, comparing sex to food and propagating freedom in both thought and life. When he was told that I was in the crowd, he asked Vinod to bring me again. I learnt later that he prepared his speeches after researching books and making notes consistently. I bought a lot of his CDs and reflected on his teachings. While I found them very motivating, I was hesitant to give up everything and join him. The enormity of the move held me back. I realized that I was content to hear his talks, absorb and learn from them and adapt whatever I could into my daily life.

Thanks to my roommate Alan Luther (from the early days in Bombay), I attended some Christian sermons. I was impressed by Pastor Sheikh and his discourses. It always gives me a high

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to listen to these stimulating intellectual talks.

I have attended the congregations of other sects, like the Brahma Kumaris, as a guest and I respect their concepts. They spread love and joy in their own way and I like to listen to their discourses. However, I occasionally watch the TV channels relaying these programmes.

Baba Ramdev's yog-pathshalas have also interested me. I have met him personally and incorporated some of his techniques into my daily exercises.

I consulted some healers for a knee problem at one of these discourses and though they favoured me with their healing touch, I was no better.

Back to the relationship with Uma. She has her own ways of letting me know her feelings. At one point in time we agreed on a secret sign for her to use when she thought I was getting drunk—she had to rub her finger against her nose. But when I saw her making the sign after my first drink, I decided to ignore her. Later in the evening, when I felt that I'd had enough and was being pressed into drinking more, I used her gesture as an excuse and said, 'See, my wife is signalling to me that I've had enough.' When we went back home I got an earful from her, 'You ask me to use a secret signal. And then you tell everybody about it!'

She tolerates my other obsessions too—once I like an outfit, I tend to wear it often, perhaps even three to four times in quick succession. Journalists in the early days have actually commented on it. I particularly love black shirts and I possess quite a few.

Uma and I have been through many ups and downs. She had a miscarriage after the three girls. That morning the bathroom was wet. Rakita had rushed into our bathroom to take a shower as she was getting late for school and the other bathrooms were occupied. Uma, in an advanced stage of pregnancy, slipped in the bathroom. She could not get up; I picked her up and rushed to the hospital.

The kids went to see Uma at the hospital that evening to find her lying on her stomach. When Rakita said that it could be bad for the baby, Uma had to tell her about the miscarriage. Rakita was very upset: 'It was because of me that you lost the baby.' Uma held her close, saying, 'No, sometimes accidents just happen, no one is to blame.'

I call attention to this incident for an entirely different reason. A film journal happened to cover it, and wrote, 'There was this shocking rumour going around that Prem Chopra's wife (who already has three daughters and is pining for a son) got pregnant again. A couple of months ago she visited a doctor (who scans the uterus in the fifth month of pregnancy to inform the anxious mother as to whether the approaching progeny is male or female) and nobody knows what happened but today Mrs Prem Chopra isn't pregnant anymore.' Journalists need to display sensitivity when covering grief. It was a very difficult time—anyone who has been through such loss will bear with us; and the last thing we needed was such tripe written about us.

Uma Chopra on Prem Chopra

I was spending my vacation with my sister Krishna when she received a proposal for me through Lekh Tandon. At that time, my older brother Rajendranath was working in the film *Jhuk Gaya Aasman* while Daboo (Randhir Kapoor) was assisting Lekh Tandon. They all knew the gentleman being proposed of and were fond of him, so this alliance found favour with all.

We met formally at Rajendranath's place and though he seemed positive, Prem wanted sometime to think.

Once we bumped into each other in a restaurant. He was with an actress while I was with my

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niece Ritu (we were about the same age and hung around together) and Kupi, another friend. Kupi was sitting facing them and she gave us a running commentary about him, 'He is drinking soup, he is talking…' Whilst leaving, Prem came to our table and wished us. All of us were giggling like schoolgirls.

We met a couple of times before our wedding on 27 March 1969.

After our wedding, I realized that a lot of girls must have wanted to marry him. Some of them were from wealthy families, very beautiful and some of very solid backgrounds. But I chose to be confident, surmising that if he had wanted, he could have married any of them, but he chose me. And whatever he saw in me then must have worked, since our marriage has survived more than four decades now.

It was in the early days of our marriage that Prem was signed for *Bobby*. When Raj-ji cast my husband in this unforgettable role, he said that the one thing he did not have to do was to establish Prem's character. His audience needed no introduction. Prem had to walk on to the scene, with his on-screen reputation preceding him, and all would know that trouble would follow.

After our marriage, Prem put me in charge of everything—right from the household to finances. I started by putting things in order; coming from a family belonging to the film industry, I knew the fickleness of this profession. As I started working with our CAs to save for our future, Lady Luck kept smiling on him too. There was always an inflow of films. Even though there were periods when he did not sign a single movie for lengths of time (seven months once), yet he was never out of work.

He has always been particular about his diction. If Hindi, he will speak flawless Hindustani; when he does a Punjabi film, it is with the necessary idiom, and ditto with English and Urdu. Prem would tape-record himself saying his dialogues and then practise, playing it again and again. Once he heard me talking in Punjabi whilst he was rehearsing and stopped me immediately. He said, 'I can't have that accent around the house, the Punjabiat might creep into me when I go for a shoot.' In the bargain, the kids too spoke in Hindi or English and much as they understand Punjabi, they never picked up enough to speak the language.

He was fond of cards, but on one occasion when a friend cheated the others, tempers flew. That was the last day he played cards. He said, 'I don't want to waste time; I need to become something in life.'

I have never seen him being rude to anyone. If he had a bad day at work, he just brought his frustrations home, he never abused or vented it on anyone. He shared his problems with me; he kept his grief to himself and his own.

Prem always understood his responsibility towards work. He has always been very careful with his eating habits and zealously exercises even today. Prem is a punctual man. He hates to be late and is always the first to report for work. In fact, his punctuality can be annoying, especially if we are going for a party. He arrives at the appointed time, and sometimes we are present even before the host! Over the years, I have managed to convince him that reaching half an hour later than the given time is just fine. It's the same when we have to catch a flight—we are always way before time.

With our daughters, he has been an indulgent father. He could never deny them anything. And they knew it. I was the disciplinarian, keeping them in check and overseeing their studies. As far as Prem was concerned, getting angry with his daughters was totally out of the question. He would fully engage with them whenever he was at home. We would go to the club together and the family would have a great time in the swimming pool. He would throw the kids around and they would always come back for more.

At first the kids used to get upset when their father would not hit back at the end of the film.

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Then we took them for a shooting and made them understand the difference between real and make-believe.

How does a marriage survive forty-five years?

Every marriage has its ups and downs; we have had our share. Marriage is about understanding and adjusting. You can't be a nag. You've got to be a balance of friend and spouse if a marriage has to stand the test of time. Even when a marriage is based on love, adjustment is the name of the game. Also, I believe that any problem between a couple has to be worked out between themselves, no one else can understand or sort it out as effectively.

Initially, girls would presume that Prem as a husband bore all the qualities that he portrayed on screen. They would ask me endless questions about how I adjusted with such a person. I had to tell them there was a difference between the real and the unreal. The *real* was entirely different to what he portrayed on screen. My friends classified me as docile, which was not true—I always had my own opinion and we understood each other. If we had an argument, we always had the maturity to give each other space till we chilled out. Consequently, we never had to say sorry, we simply understood and learnt to adjust and adapt to each other's point of view.

In fact, my individuality and strength of character was what prompted my husband to ask and trust my opinion about various things. Again, such individuality does not necessarily mean that you have to be 'working'. It is hard work raising three kids and being a homemaker, a fact that most mothers will vouch for.

Be your own person, have your own opinion, have your individuality and be the best friend of your spouse. You need to be in a happy space and find contentment within yourself. And once you are in that space, you spread happiness effortlessly around you.

Lastly, in a marriage, when you give space to each other, it helps to survive the ups and down of life. Kahlil Gibran's musings on marriage come to mind, 'Let there be spaces in your togetherness… Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup... For the pillars of the temple stand apart. And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.'

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Impact on Children

All my girls went through a phase of going to the theatre to see my film for the first time and crying inconsolably when I was being beaten up. The entire audience would turn around to stare at them as they screamed, '*Yeh mere Papa ko maar raha hai.'* (They are beating my father.)

With time, their comprehension of good and bad became clearer. In the '80s, I remember an incident when we went to see the preview of *Aanchal*. After the show, people gathered round me congratulating me on my portrayal of Jagan—the lecherous, conniving bumpkin. I was puffed up with pride till I caught my little girl Rakita's eye. She was a child; she believed her dad to be the world's greatest guy, and here was the world congratulating him on being an excellent bad guy.

Throughout the film, even though many people kept chatting with me, I kept one eye on Rakita to gauge her reaction. And what I saw was a shocked little face moving between the pictures on the screen and her father's face. It was so hilarious and so poignant at the same time.

That evening, she followed me silently, looking very unhappy and then I heard her telling a friend, 'My daddy's not like that man Jagan, you know, he's different,' and the friend, nodding sagely saying, 'I know your dad is an actor, this didn't really happen.'

But I felt uncomfortable sensing the conflict in her mind. She had watched me on the screen for three hours committing the vilest acts possible so convincingly, and I still don't know if it was a compliment to my acting or a paradox that my daughter almost believed there was a possibility that I was bad.

Playing the bad man was now making me sick. I felt really bad when my daughters recoiled with fear and didn't talk to me for days after seeing me play a bad man, ruthless to the core, in one of my films. It took me and my wife Uma days to dispel all those doubts in their minds and convince them that daddy was so good at home, he was not a bad man and all that was just an act. They finally got over that stage and I was the happiest man on earth. It is very difficult to be a bad man in the eyes of your children.

Often my kids would see me die or being taken away by the cops. After the film was over, they would just stare at me. They couldn't fathom how a man they saw dying on the screen could still be standing next to them.

Kids in their school would question why their father played a bad man. Once Rakita came back from school and sat me down, seriously trying to convince me to earn an honest living, even if it meant becoming a taxi driver.

Once again I had to make them understand that it was just a character I was playing in the film. I enlightened my daughters about the role of an actor, how it is a job just like any other and how, thanks to this job, we had a beautiful house, education for them and so many other luxuries. Their questions were never-ending. They understood my explanations, or at least I thought and wished they did.

Still another time, I organized a private screening of one of my films in Bandra, and my youngest daughter came with her friends. Prerana's friends kept consoling her that her father wasn't a real villain and that he was acting like one in the film. But I couldn't look her in the eye for a few

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days. Rakita, by then, had resigned herself to the situation.

Once this phase was past, they became my best fans and worst critics. They would point out flaws in my performance when they didn't find a scene convincing enough. They would tell me, 'Papa, you didn't do it properly this time. It was looking rehearsed.'

Around this time, I went through a phase where I was fed up of playing negative roles and looked forward to a change. The bright patch came with *Jadu Tona, Farz Aur Kanoon* and *Prem Tapasya,* all positive roles. I was hoping they would work. I had lost interest in negative roles; however, it turned out to be a brief season before I was back to playing a bad man.

I share a warm, open and friendly relationship with my daughters. While they were growing up, Uma was the strict one. They were scared of their mother, but I was one of them.

My kids gave the random interview as they were growing up. Rakita did one for *Savvy* and Punita did one for *Cine Blitz*. Even little Prerana put in her two bits for the *Cine Blitz* interview. They wrote a short note in a *Stardust Annual* about me in an article, which featured other star kids too. Their favourite pastime, they said, was bullying dad Prem Chopra! That's what surprises people. While I strike fear in the hearts of the whole world, I am petrified of my daughters.

My kids, too, were star-struck in their own way. Punita loved the Reena Roy pedal pushers; she wanted golden ones. She even sported a side ponytail just like Reena's. Her favourite movies were *Kranti, Padosan,* and *Saboot* and she insisted on watching one of them every afternoon when she got back from school.

There is this mantra that I recite every day, which I would invoke for the kids during their exams, building it up with a lot of drama. My recitation would have the kids bursting into laughter till I admonished them, 'Don't laugh if you want this mantra to work.' One of Prerana's friends in the building took the mantra very seriously and would come to have it invoked by me before every exam and every important event in her life. Knowing that she was not supposed to laugh if the mantra had to work, she would try her best to be serious till an involuntary smile would crinkle up her mouth. Then she would entreat me to repeat the mantra, promising to be serious. I would start off, once again with a lot of drama, while my kids would be amused. That child is forty years old now, but the belief in the mantra and the drama surrounding it continues to this day.

Prem Chopra, in his Daughters' Words

Prerana

I suppose I had a Jekyll and Hyde personality in school. Because I was questioned so consistently on why my father played a bad man, I withdrew into myself. But the minute I came home I became my natural, exuberant self.

When our parents had a party, we would watch the guests through the wooden staircase. We wanted to see all the actors. We would be thrilled when Neetu Singh would come up to see us tucked in bed. She was the only one who came up to our room. She had the liberty to do so as she was related, but for us she was 'the Neetu Singh'; and we would be thrilled.

Dad has been a mixture of modern and traditional. He always liked us dressing in sporty clothes; he was happier if we wore jeans and keds, but was fairly disapproving of us in anything revealing.

We would all troop out for a walk every morning around Pali Hill and after the first round he would ask us (presumably in jest), 'Are you tired or are you ready for the next round?' We would be exhausted and ready to drop and run down the Nirvana slope (our building) by then. Once Rakita

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decided to call his bluff and started walking ahead, looking all set for the next round. She had caught him out! Dad petered out, 'I think we should go home.'

Dad may not have attended our parent–teacher annual meetings but he was always there for the annual days. We would spend our weekends in Otters Club. We always had a swim in the morning followed by chicken sandwiches and chutney sandwiches with milkshakes before our standard Chinese meal in the afternoon with our parents. We loved the routine; it was the high point of the weekend. Whilst in the pool, Dad would lift us high in the air and throw us in the water. We would shriek with laughter and keep asking him for more.

Dad always loved his drinks on the balcony; it still remains his favourite watering hole.

Were we ever attracted to films? This is a question we are often asked. Every child is attracted to the glamour world and so were we, but we were also exposed to a lot more. Our parents were adamant about one thing—we had to finish our graduation! Only then would we be allowed to follow our own desires.

Another wonderful thing about Dad is we never heard him talk negatively of anyone. He believes no one is bad. So on the rare occasion that he does speak disparagingly of someone, we know that the person certainly deserves it.

Stardust Annual *1982 had a section with star children writing short notes about their dads. Prerana revealed to the* Stardust *journalist, 'My daddy is MAD!' and went on repeating it before finally revealing that MAD stood for 'My Most Adorable Darling'!*

Punita

We always joke that while the whole world is scared of Prem Chopra, he's scared of his daughters. Dad has always been a very loving and affectionate man and whenever he was home, we were all over him. We bullied him unmercifully and he in return pampered us. It was we, his daughters, who decided what he was going to eat and what he would wear. He never defied us; he did not dare to! Once, we were visiting Chintu uncle, and when he asked after Dad, pat came the reply that since we were away, he was probably near the fridge, hogging away!

We're all his favourites. I was always the meek one and especially attached to him. I loved to please him in every way. His favourite pastime was teasing my younger sister Prerana. One day he came home from shooting, still in his wig and costume, and Prerana refused to allow him in, thinking he was some banjara. But he kept on ringing the bell and it was only after she threatened to call the police that he revealed his identity! They both had a good laugh over it.

He also used to tease her constantly about cancelling her much desired trip to London. From a very early age, she wished to go abroad and Dad was always promising to take her very soon. Prerana used to live for that 'very soon'. So whenever she was naughty, Dad would pretend to call up the airline to cancel her ticket. This would quieten her immediately and she'd be willing to toe the line. This went on for years till Prerana finally grew up.

At home he was a mild and loving person. I don't remember Dad ever losing his temper or shouting at us. It's Mom who was the disciplinarian. But Dad was really firm about two things—studies and extracurricular activities. He has always insisted that we had to excel in our school and college curriculum. He maintains that education is one of the most important things for a woman. He also desired that we attain a fair degree of accomplishment in other fields like painting, writing, cooking, etc. Rakita is an excellent painter and writes very well.

Another thing that he insisted was that we never got carried away by his success. He never

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allowed us to use the car to go to college; he insisted we travel by buses and trains. Mom said it was to ground us to the realities of life. Today we have everything, tomorrow we may not—this lesson was taught early.

He likes us to be well dressed and has excellent taste in clothes. We love it when he shops for us. Each time he went abroad, he got us the world. He particularly liked us in jeans and other sporty clothes. When we were unmarried, he considered us too young for salwar-kameez and sarees. I guess he didn't like to face the idea that we are going to grow up and fly away from the nest. The thought was heartbreaking for us too. Dad didn't like us going out too often, and we hardly enjoyed it ourselves. Most of the times we went out as a family. Dad was so busy shooting that we always looked forward to spending time with him. You should see his diary even today! We've filled every single date of the year with very important appointments—and they're all with us. He always laughs when he sees it. Even occasions like New Year were spent with our parents and their friends. And thankfully, their children were our friends too.

As an actor he's marvellous. Quite simply the best! We are really proud of him, and frankly, I think he should only stick to villainous roles because he simply excels at them. No one can be quite like him. Actually, he's an absolutely versatile actor and can do just about any role. But we prefer him in substantial roles as a villain rather than inconsequential, positive roles. My sister hates it when he wears a wig and does one of those silly comic roles. But I don't mind it, because I think he can carry off anything.

★

My granddaughter, Khyana, then three years old, went to watch *3 Idiots* (2009). Prerana had already warned Sharman not to take Khyana for the screening, feeling that she was too young for the film. She knew what she was talking about; she too had been a little girl going for her father's films. Sharman begged to differ and said that he would seat her on his lap. Khyana enjoyed the movie thoroughly up to the scene where her father (Sharman Joshi) jumps off the window attempting suicide. She turned to her mother and said, 'Something is happening here,' pointing to her heart, and continued, 'and I don't know why my eyes are watering.' Khyana, who till that time had thought crying was when you got hurt physically, found her heart bleeding. Prerana wisely held back from telling Sharman, 'I told you so,' while Sharman took Khyana out to explain the same things Prerana was made to understand all those years ago. Life had turned a full circle…

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All my sons-in-law are very intelligent and doing well for themselves. Vikas is multifaceted—a singer, an actor, involved in several businesses. Sharman is a fine actor and into films in a big way. He started with Gujarati theatre and his love of the stage continues. And no Hindi film of repute is really complete until Rahul adds his creative touch to the publicity campaigns. They all are focused and have a great future ahead.

Prem Chopra, According to the Sons-in-Law

Vikas Bhalla

I first met Dad soon after Punita and I started dating. With a straight face he asked me a very 'father of the bride' question, 'Are you serious?' The question was akin to a thunderbolt, but there was no doubt in my mind as I said, 'Of course! There are no two ways about it.' I had already met Punita's mom; overall they seemed satisfied.

My first impression was of a very chilled-out, friendly person. He never made you conscious of his age or stature. He ensured that I was at ease; in fact, even more than Mom.

While I share a wonderful relationship with my own dad, it is with Punita's dad that I discuss most things. We have taken a couple of trips together and had some great times. We drink together; perhaps this stems from the fact that he has three daughters while we sons-in-law fill in as the sons.

And though he has a wonderful relationship with Sharman and Rahul, I think that there is that extra something between us, possibly because I have known him the longest. Our relationship is of comfort, we have a rapport which is very special.

I truly admire the goodwill he has built over his years in the industry. We have all benefited from it—it makes a lot of difference when a person knows how you are related to him. It gives a slight cushioning when you are dealing with people, providing a certain comfort level.

He is always there for his friends and family. And any advice from him is invaluable, thanks to his vast experience of dealing with people over the years.

Another thing that I love and admire about him is his sense of humour. I think he is brilliant at the art of diffusing a serious situation to bring out the lighter side. A recent example of his quick-wittedness was when we had gone to the opening of a restaurant and the food was not very good. He said, *'Khana toh bada gadbad hai toh yeh opening day closing day nahin ban jaye* (The food is not good; the opening day should not become closing day).'

He comes up with many such funny ones.

I remember another incident, this one highlighting his goodness. We were in Canada for a show. The organizers had run out of money and were trying to renegotiate while all the performers felt that there was no room for discussion.

Next they approached him and said 'Prem-ji, you are a senior, you must come, or else we will be finished.' He deliberated and then went on stage. I asked him the next day if he had received his dues. He told me that the organizer had left his credit card as a deposit with him. I was flabbergasted.

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'What will you do with his credit card?' He replied, 'The organizer said he would come in the evening with the money, and if he failed to do so I could keep his credit card.' He was so gullible. I laughed; probably the card is still with him, lying around somewhere. That balance never came. He obliged the organizer because of his helping nature, but a lot of people take advantage of him.

Someday I will ask him about his affairs in the industry, the ones I have heard of. I will wait to ask him when we are four drinks down.

But in all seriousness, I am privileged to be related to such a great actor and a wonderful human being. I have always looked upto him as an ideal and will continue to do so.

Sharman Joshi

I remember my first meeting with Dad. I was still a teenager and studying with Prerana in college; we were in love. Prerana and I had already been seeing each other for sometime and I was now being asked to come and present my case. I was petrified as I envisaged him with thirty or forty bloodthirsty goons behind him. I imagined reaching his house to find him yelling, '*Maro isko* (Kill him)!' But my experience was completely different. He was an absolute gentleman, even though he could have been otherwise.

Had I been the father in his place, I would have been very concerned to find my daughter in love with a struggling actor who had no clue yet about his career. A veteran in the profession, he knew exactly what it takes to be an actor; at best a slippery path with talent, luck and many other factors coming into play. But he handled the situation with grace and dignity—he seemed to realize that his daughter was in love and serious about our relationship. I am not sure how sure he actually felt about our love, but we were given time and space to take it forward. He concluded our meeting with the understanding that if we continued to feel as strongly for each other over the next few years, they would be happy to give their consent.

Prerana and I decided to wait till things picked up professionally before we married. Soon I was in a better position and in time we were married.

Thereafter, I spent a lot more time with Prem-ji; and there is a lot to learn from him: the consistency with which he employs discipline and humility in his life, the focus on everything large and small even after spending so many years and so much time in the profession. And to forge ahead with the enthusiasm and drive of a youngster on the films that he is working on.

Over a period of time, apart from the relationship we have shared, I think we have also become close as individuals. As a result, we have had many constructive exchanges about his views on the management of an actor's career, which has been of tremendous help to me. But he neither forgets nor lets you forget that he is first and foremost a family man at home. When we are all together, he is extremely mindful of the anecdotes that he will relate to his kids or, for that matter, any of his sons-in-law. He will never say anything that may compromise or offend another person; he respects individual privacy and dignity, however old or insignificant an anecdote might be. His personal experiences, he staunchly believes, are meant to stay with him—a very important lesson to be learnt. And it says a lot about his character; he is someone who cares and is concerned about what should be spoken in public.

As an actor he is an immense achiever, and when I remember visualizing Prem Chopra with thirty goons, I know that such impressions stem from a rich body of work. You actually imagine the character he played on the screen. Well, most of the characters he played, anyway. His contribution to cinema is full of rich characterization and brilliant acting—a reference point for movie makers and moviegoers even today.

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I have seen him effortlessly adapting himself to the script and the director before he puts his shoulder to the wheel. And then he will stick to the director's conception—loud, subtle or natural, it is the director's prerogative and he goes along with it.

My favourite film of Prem-ji's is *Shaheed*. Early films are usually imbued with a certain innocence of the actor. I loved him in *Do Anjaane* and *Kranti* and many other Amitabh Bachchan movies. I think he really complemented Mr Bachchan. You need a strong and powerful actor for a hero to look good; Prem-ji did that with flying colours.

I love the way he interacts with his sons-in-law—Rahul, Vikas and myself. Of course, I think he is the most carefree when he is with Vikas, it may be because they have spent a lot of time with each other. He is easy and fun when with Vikas; with Rahul and me he is more cautious. It is very interesting when all three of us are together, as he handles all of us differently.

Initially, when Vikas and I would be invited to the house for dinner, we would still be in the midst of having drinks, with dinner yet to be served, when Prem-ji would suddenly retire to his room for the night. I felt quite insulted, almost as if I was being asked to leave. It was a contrary situation—all evening one would experience the traditional Punjabi 'beta-beta' and hugs but it would culminate in the host leaving you halfway through the evening. By and by, I got used to the fact that this was Prem-ji and we just had to live with it. Eventually, Vikas and I became so comfortable that we continued with the party long after he had gone to bed. But I suppose it is this discipline of Prem-ji and his healthy outlook on personal and professional matters, which have helped him keep fit.

Since the early years when I saw Prerana with her sisters, I have always wanted three daughters, or more correctly three children for us. I love their relationship with their father; they take care of him and fuss around him so lovingly. And he too basks in their love and showers them with even more. Now the house is full of grandchildren—we have our daughter and the twin boys, then there is Rakita's daughter and Punita's daughter and son. To see him in a grandfather's role is pure delight. He plays and spoils them to his heart's content; I think he really enjoys being with his grandkids. He just loves that space.

The relationship he shares with Mom is also very interesting. I like the way he steps back graciously to allow her space in public; she voices her opinions comfortably in conversations.

Whenever I meet people and conversation comes around to him, I am overwhelmed by the nice things people say about him. Recently when I was doing *Super Nani* (forthcoming), I met Randhir Kapoor and he said, 'He is my relative, but what a nice man yaar! When Rishi and I were making *Henna* [1991], both of us felt sorry that there was no role for Prem in the film. He has not one mean streak in him, he is a great guy.' Randhir-ji is a very forthright man and he does not mince words, so I know if he says it then he means it.

I was working with Aamir in *3 Idiots* and he wanted to meet Dad and came home for dinner; Mr Hirani also joined us. Aamir displayed great interest in Dad's body of work, it was a wonderful evening.

I really cherish the love and interest he displays in my work and the direction of my career. All the same, he is never inquisitive or forceful in his opinion. He believes that a lot of it has to be my instinctive reaction to the work offered to me. So the advice he offers is couched in love and care, rich with his experience. My journey has also become his, he enjoys my little successes and achievements, and I revel in the fact that he is my father-in-law.

He was watching a trial screening of *Ferrari Ki Sawaari* with his friend Salim Khan when Mr Khan happened to praise my work. Dad was so overwhelmed that he became emotional and broke down. (He was later embarrassed by this display of emotion.) My mother-in-law related this incident

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and it moved me deeply that he was so happy for me.

Rahul Nanda

Rakita and I first met through an arranged set-up and gradually came to know each other better over a couple of years. We developed a strong friendship before finally tying the knot. In all the years that I have known my father-in-law, I have observed that there is a refreshing openness that he carries with him, making him permanently young in mind.

I love hearing anecdotes from the different eras he has been through when we sit together. I have always felt that there was great creativity in the ’60s and ’70s that we were too young to understand. And I am so lucky to be close to a person who was part of that era and can give me an insight into the creative minds of actors and directors of that period. He is a person who loves to work, open-hearted and humble. He is a people’s person; if I invite him to a gathering, he will always be there. He is someone who is unanaminously respected by the entire industry for not just being a good actor but a great human being. There is not a single person I have met who has not spoken fondly about my father-in-law. I was very young when I lost my dad but I remember the close bond he shared with Rakita’s father. This is a great quality and the reason for his survival.

I have always marvelled at his strength in being able to survive in the industry for more than five decades. With just over two decades under my belt, I find it difficult to survive the politics.

Here are the answers, in this book, to all my questions about him. Along with my wife, I too have been living with this book for the past one and a half years. I keep hearing about it day in and day out. Some of it is new, but most of it already known. And I am very happy that this book is being published. I, too, cherished a dream to complete my father’s incomplete novel; I couldn’t, but I am so glad that Rakita has been able to write her father’s story.

I must add that the three daughters are extremely grounded and the credit for this goes to their mother. She was and is the home minister. While their father was working and remained exclusively in his creative zone, their mother took care of everything. It freed his mind from the daily nitty-gritties to pursue his career. My mother-in-law is a strong and sensible woman with a mind of her own. Her daughters owe a lot to her!

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A journalist asked me recently, 'What's it like to be Bollywood's best-loved bad man?' My reply was, 'That stage is past. I'm now playing positive roles. You'll see me as a grandfather in my next films.'

Accept change and adapt to it. Never become a 'yes' man. People maintain commercial relationships in this industry. As long as they can sell their stories with your face on it, they are your friends. After that, you are simply history.

Another important thing—this is a close-knit fraternity—we should try and sort out differences amongst ourselves without blowing it out of proportion. I had a brief altercation with a producer–director–actor in the '80s at a party. Another actor was also involved by choosing to stand behind me. A large section of the industry called me up over the phone the next day, assuring me of their support. But we sorted out the matter amongst ourselves. No one spoke to the press. Since it never blew out of proportion, the negative vibes too didn't last long.

Though I have worked with almost everyone over the years, I had my share of misses too. Notable among them were filmmakers Bimal Roy and V. Shantaram. I admired Yash Chopra and Raj Kapoor who adapted to changes, as did B.R. Chopra saab, who never left solid storytelling.

People seek me out for only one reason—I am honest to the core in my work. I have always believed that only good work gets you more assignments. I never believed in contacts, networking or manipulating. No one's here to do charity, the game is commercial and if you are not able to deliver, you are out. Has every child of a film celebrity made it in cinema? And yes, I am also my worst critic. When people are busy praising me, I am busy taking stock of my shortcomings.

I was also particular about my choice of roles. I wanted to give varying performances: some villainous, some sympathetic and emotional without a trace of villainy. In some roles I was even able to blend comedy with villainy and play a lovable villain.

The year I got the Filmfare Award for the city-bred man in *Do Anjaane*, I was also nominated for *Mehbooba,* where I played a tribal man. In *Shaheed* and *Chhupa Rustam* I played diametrically different roles. In *Aasoo Bane Angaarey* I play a scheming politician in the beginning, while the second half depicts me as a corporate man out for revenge, though I dress in the garb of a saintly man to deceive my victims. The variations I managed to weave into my performances became one of the strongest reasons for my survival in the industry over five decades.

In India, people believe that your destiny takes you towards success. I am not against astrology if it serves to give you strength, though my personal belief is that you can shape your destiny by making good use of your talents and the opportunities that come your way. I also believe that one's destiny lies in one's hands, in sincerely and honestly working on the job at hand.

My ability to adapt to change was another important factor in my survival. From being a top villain, I switched to father roles. I always used to be the bad guy. Pran saab was ageing by the time I came on the scene; in a way, I resurrected the villain. I was on a high during the '60s and '70s and most of the '80s too. In fact, I was amongst the highest bracket of villains. By the late '80s and through the '90s I started being offered character roles of a mellow person like the father or uncle. I

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had no option but to accept. I was a realist; I knew that diversifying would have to be my survival mantra. The adjustment was easy because I was in love with my profession and I wanted to continue to work. I am happy with my choices as they gave me better scope to perform and enhance my professional career. I received a lot of critical acclaim when I played older roles and I knew that my instinct was right. I was in for another innings. The feather in the cap was the acceptance by the people.

But even when I was adapting to changes, I remained honest, devoted and disciplined in my profession. I never displayed any star tantrums, so typical of the time; probably that also helped me carry on. I have seen people like Ashok Kumar and Dilip Kumar looking more nervous than me on the sets, and it was not because they were scared. It was because they were involved in the role, intent on giving a good shot every time

Recently, I received rave reviews for *Rocket Singh* where I play the grandfather; even Yash Chopra was happy. When I look back upon my career, I know that if I had not adapted I would have been on the shelf. So many colleagues of mine were superstars but believed wrongly that they still ruled the roost, and refusing to adjust to the changing times, they faded away. I held no such illusions. I always gave importance to the roles offered and was therefore willing to compromise on price; I knew that pride cannot help you to stay in the industry for long. And out of the blue, Punjabi filmmakers who made it big were clamouring to work with me.

It gives me great pleasure to see my body of work being recognized all over the world. Recently I have been given a lot of awards. I have received Lifetime Achievement Awards not only from India but different parts of the world such as Atlantic City, Ireland, Norway, Berlin and Dubai. In India, the Punjab and West Bengal governments awarded me the Iconic Lifetime Achievement Award. Even now when I go on stage it is to huge applause from the people.

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Retirement…What Retirement?

Put an actor in a room with pots full of money and gold and he will die of suffocation. An actor needs to work in order to live.

When people ask me about my retirement plans, the answer is a categorical 'No'. There are only two reasons for anybody to retire in this industry—first, when somebody stops getting work, which happens very often, and second, when somebody is physically unable to work in films. Otherwise, no one in this glam world, whether a spotboy, technician, producer or director, would ever want to retire. At least I would not want to retire until I stop getting work. It's a bitter truth that you get so used to the stardom, popularity, money, fame and adoration that you can't afford to keep away from them. Even top stars have made a comeback after a hiatus.

It is important to invest while things are good for you. My wife was taking care of the finances and has invested well. We maintain the same lifestyle now that we had twenty years ago. You always have to think ahead. The Indian mentality is to live off children when one is retired. But I always believed that you must have your own nest and not be dependent on anyone.

Every actor possesses a degree of professional insecurity; it is this insecurity of losing work that makes him give his best shot every time. It drives him to work harder. Amitabh Bachchan is the best example. Whoever has taken it easy has been lost and forgotten in no time. This is the norm of life and this industry in particular.

I want to keep working. As you grow older, newer and different opportunities may come knocking, you have to be a realist and go for them. Today I have a grandfather's role; tomorrow…who knows? But I am ready to keep working, and to keep adapting.

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On Fitness

My kids call me the baby of the house as I am the first one to go to bed. I've always been an early riser and would go for a brisk walk every morning around Pali Hill before going off to work. Once Joggers Park came up in the late '80s, my walks shifted there.

My love for walking has its roots in Simla. We would take three to four trips around the hills every day. Once I shifted to Bombay, I started playing tennis. Then I took to jogging. But with conflicting reports about the benefits and perils of jogging, I decided to switch back to my first love, walking. My walking has always been as fast as my jogging. With age, one has to adapt to changes in the body. Over the years my knees began to trouble me. My father also suffered similarly, but since there was no knee replacement surgery in those days, he became housebound. Today, with medical advancements you can easily get knee replacements and the quality of life does not suffer at all. Before I went in for surgery, I told the knee surgeon that I missed Joggers Park, to which his rejoinder was that I would be back on the track within a month.

Though my knees were troubling me, I did not just sit around and complain. I started alternate exercises that were easier on my body. Instead of a walk, I started swimming and doing yoga. Today both my knees have been operated on and I am back at Joggers Park.

Journalists coming to interview me would invariably complain about the fourteen floors they had to climb to get to my apartment in Nibbana. In the '70s and '80s the lift was usually out of order, forcing them to take the stairs. Eventually, the building installed new lifts. I used the stairs regularly as an exercise even if the lifts were in order.

In the earlier days, I played a lot of cricket matches that were held for social causes by the industry. The rules of the game were always bent for the stars; some in consideration for the fair sex, and some to accommodate indifferent players (like the bowler bowling underarm from half pitch). But since it was all for a good cause, we ended up having lots of fun.

A couple of years ago I slipped in the bathroom and injured myself badly. I had to be taken by ambulance to Lilavati Hospital. Much later, I was pained to hear about the lack of civic sense of our people. Unfortunately, an ambulance in Mumbai seems to motivate some drivers to edge their cars ahead of the emergency vehicle, in the hope that the passage cleared for the ambulance can benefit them too. Many drivers entertain these thoughts. That day my daughters, unable to bear the slow progress of the ambulance, stepped out to tap the bonnets of the cars trying this stunt. They literally directed the traffic upto the hospital, ensuring that the ambulance went through. The other day, when I was crossing Worli, I saw an electronic signage that read 'Please make way for an ambulance'. It is a pity that we need to educate the public about this basic fact.

Very often I am asked about the secret of my well-being, the glow I seem to always have. I put it down to the years I spent at Simla. But let me also share some natural potions that I start my day with. One daily concoction is a mixture of a glass of water and garlic, black pepper paste and ginger–

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honey for my throat. Uma also gives me aloe vera juice, plus a naturopathy brew she makes with asafoetida, turmeric, etc. for general well-being.

Then I have tea, cornflakes with milk or dalia with dry fruits. I prefer a cheese cracker or toast with coffee and end up having an occasional egg.

Around 9 a.m. I do some light yogic exercises and pranayam. If no shoot is scheduled, I spend the morning in Otters Club. Normally I swim and then have a massage. I frequent the library here and have spent many a morning in that room.

I have always been a people's person and in the evenings you can catch me at Café Coffee Day on Carter Road. I meet up with my friends at Sun-n-Sand quite often.

Recently I was irritated with myself as I was constantly down due to various physical mishaps. One morning I looked at myself in the mirror and firmly told myself, 'Be positive, be positive.' I repeated this mantra eight to ten times till I was convinced. I then said aloud, 'You are all right now, go ahead. You are okay, okay, okay.' And suddenly, just like that, I felt better.

On Competition

I believe in minding my own business. I've never tried to cut out anybody, nor have I ever planned anything destructive like some actors do. I have always believed in hard work. Maybe that is why I never felt the pinch of competition. I have always been in demand, but then sometimes the graph does move up and down.

I haven't felt threatened by new villains because I have never been greedy about getting too many roles. I want a few good roles and I work hard on them.

All of us who comprised the villain fraternity—including the legendary Pran saab, Ranjeet, Ajit, Iftekar, Jeevan, Danny, Gulshan Grover, Amrish Puri and Shakti Kapoor were not exactly enemies off-screen. We beat each other to pulp on screen (when not beating up the hero), but off-screen we were just normal human beings, exactly like the others on the sets of our movies. Most of us were extremely social and polite gentlemen. We would meet and talk over drinks. There was a healthy competition then. If we ever had a disagreement, it didn't escalate to headlines in a magazine. We would sort it out amongst ourselves, as gentlemen.

I was friends with stars at the pinnacle as well as the newest entrant in the industry. I just minded my own business and did not gossip. I never needed to.

On Social Work

I happened to be the chief guest for a function at an institute for the blind, and the moment I started talking, everyone recognized my voice. I was deeply moved when they repeated my famous dialogue from *Souten, 'Main who bala hoon jo sheeshe se patthar ko todta hoon.*'

Social activities have always inspired me. Over the years, I have participated actively in many programmes for social causes and also tried my best to help needy people. I participated in shows, both in India and abroad. Once I even went to Singapore to help raise funds for building a temple. Wherever I went, I received great response. I have tried very hard to entertain my audiences.

Rarely have I refused my services for a social cause. Yet, I must point out that some social work is done openly whereas a vast amount is also done quietly, without much fanfare.

In the 1986 film industry strike, stars took the battle to the streets. The strike had rendered

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about four lakh people—ranging from high-profile film stars to daily-wage workers—jobless. The morcha was truly symbolic of the unity, solidarity and strength of all sections of the film industry, including stars, producers, distributors, exhibitors, technicians, studio and laboratory owners and workers. The show of strength was also unique, since not even slogan shouting marred the procession, which was orderly and peaceful.

Hope 86, a charity show, was also one of the biggest stage shows organized by the industry at the time. The advantage of a charity show, besides raising money, is that a lot of people watching the concert become aware of the cause.

All the above are but a few examples; I have lost count of others. Probably it is better so.

But I have never been tempted to make the jump from social work to politics, no matter how much I was asked to by various parties. I never entertained such ambitions for myself.

My Collection of Caps

I have a penchant for caps and assiduously add to my collection wherever I go. My collection is enviable—all kinds of hats and caps and sundry headgear. I have caps from Fiji, Australia, Jamaica and so many other places all over the world. Necessity is the mother of invention, they say. And so it was with me. You see, what began as a necessity has now become a hobby. When I realized that my hair was thinning, I decided to start wearing a cap. Initially I was very pleased about it, feeling secure that my baldness was concealed under a fashion statement. I also told myself that I could actually be starting a trend. Unfortunately for me, Amrish Puri began wearing hats, so I decided that 'as soon as an idea is accepted by all and sundry, it is time to reject it'!

I have to admit that I left no stone unturned in trying to save my hair from falling. I tried anything and everything from the yellow of an egg to lime to a concoction called Silvercream. This cream was sold to me in my *TOI* days and the salesman, convincing me of its efficacy, fobbed three to four bottles on to me. I would vigorously rub it into my scalp everyday, but found to my chagrin that my hair was actually falling a lot more. A few days later, the salesman spotted the condition of my hair and ran for his dear life with me in hot pursuit.

Ironically, I have done advertisements for Brylcreem in the '60s which appeared in various issues of *Reader's Digest*: 'Prem Chopra, star of *Woh Kaun Thi* uses Brylcreem.'

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It isn't difficult to portray a good man. But try and see if you can portray a bad man—a rapist, a killer, an abnormal character who is absolutely despicable, capable of repulsing the audience. Believe me, it is tough, not easy as people make it out to be.

I am a very keen observer of human nature. I spend endless hours observing and filing away interesting mannerisms of the common man, no matter what his occupation. This occupation of mine is invaluable when I need to bring variety into my role. I dig into my mental database and try to come up with an interesting feature to enhance the character. Sometimes it is the walk that impresses me, sometimes it is the way in which a cabbie lights a cigarette and sometimes it is the mannerisms of a bhaji wallah. Life is so interesting, and one gets to meet so many different people. Without such observations, life for me would be a stark canvas. It is the drive towards a perfect portrayal that keeps my adrenalin flowing.

Upkar

My role in *Upkar* had various shades, progressing from the virtuous and dutiful brother in the village to the self-assured city boy who emerges as a negative character. I was the perfect foil to Manoj Kumar, who embodied all that was good in a man. It was a great movie for a newcomer and a resounding success. I touched the stars.

Waris

Due to disagreements in the king's household, his wife and son decide to move away from his kingdom. Years later, the king passes away and the palace has to locate the prince so that he can claim his rightful place on the throne. Three young men, all claiming to be Ram Kumar, the prince, are located. The palace officials put them all to the test, which they pass successfully, leaving the officials befuddled.

I played Ram Kumar #1 while Jeetendra was Ram Kumar #2 and Mehmood was Ram Kumar #3.

Do Raaste

I played a good guy, part of a happy family who gradually comes under the influence of his wife and turns hostile.

Directed by Raj Khosla, the movie starred Rajesh Khanna as the dutiful son and Mumtaz as his love interest. Balraj Sahni and Kamini Kaushal played the eldest son and his wife. I was the wayward son with Bindu as my wife who created disputes.

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The story was based on the trials and tribulations of a lower-middle-class family. It placed emphasis on respect for elders, the paramount status of the mother, the sanctity of the joint family and the supremacy of relations that are stronger than ties of blood.

I had one of the best roles in the film. It was applauded by critics who went on to say that the hero of the film was Prem Chopra. This despite the fact that my portrayal was negative—that of the 'bad son'.

Kati Patang

I played the suave, smooth-talking, crooked man who embraces the dim-witted maidservant as he puts poison in her master's glass of milk.

On the eve of her wedding, Madhavi (Asha Parekh) runs away to her lover Kailash (Prem Chopra), only to find him in the arms of Shabnam (Bindu). Due to events that soon unfold, Madhavi assumes the identity of a dead woman, Poonam. She discovers that her uncle had arranged her marriage with Kamal Sinha (Rajesh Khanna). Kamal is attracted to Poonam, but she tries to distance herself, fearing that he will uncover the truth about her. Then Shabnam and Kailash re-enter her life, making her look like an imposter.

Purab Aur Pachhim

In 1942 British India, Harnam (Pran) betrays a freedom fighter in return for a reward. The freedom fighter is killed, leaving his wife, Ganga (Kamini Kaushal) and family devastated and destitute. Years later, the freedom fighter's son, Bharat (Manoj Kumar), goes to London for higher studies. On his arrival in Britain, he meets his father's college friend, Sharma (Madan Puri), and his Westernized wife and children. Preeti (Sharma's daughter) has long blonde hair, wears mini-dresses, smokes and drinks and has no idea of Indian values till she meets Bharat. Preeti and Bharat fall in love and though she wants to marry him, she doesn't want to live in India.

I played OP/Omkar, Harman's son from his second marriage, brought up with Western values. I represented all things negative as per the Indian value system. My character depicted a simplistic view of a West steeped in greed, lust and depravity, while Bharat (Manoj Kumar) stood for love, honour and piety.

Bobby

The movie immortalized the line '*Prem naam hai mera, Prem Chopra*'.

The film is a story about the love between two teenagers of different classes. I make an appearance towards the end at a point when the lovers Bobby (Dimple Kapadia) and Raja (Rishi Kapoor) run away together. Raja's father advertises a reward for anyone who can help find his son. Prem Chopra wants the money, and he and his goons kidnap Raja and Bobby.

Jab Andhera Hota Hai

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A serial killer (played by me) who murders young women at nightfall is on the loose. The police are on the hunt for the killer. Who is he? Will the cops catch him?

Prem Nagar

I play the tyrannical zamindar who lets loose a pack of hungry hounds on hapless farmers asking him for a raise.

Karan Singh (Rajesh Khanna) lives a wealthy lifestyle in a palace along with his widowed mother, an elder brother, Shamsher (played by me), Shamsher's wife (Bindu) and daughter, Meena. His mother, Rani Maa (Kamini Kaushal), spent most of her time playing cards and left his upbringing to his nanny. Now an adult, he is a womanizer and alcoholic, but comes to the rescue of a former air hostess, Lata (Hema Malini), who is being molested by her boss. He hires her as his secretary and permits her family to move into one of his cottages. Lata, attempting to change his bad habits, initially meets with opposition, but eventually succeeds; they fall in love. Karan even builds a palace and names it 'Prem Nagar'. Their idyllic romance is shattered when Lata is set up, accused falsely and humiliated by Shamsher.

Kala Patthar

I portrayed a well-heeled coal baron who cared two hoots if his men lay trapped in his mines.

Seth Dhanraj makes lives difficult for the coal miners by giving them poor equipment, less than sufficient medical supplies and lack of facilities. The three heros Vijay (Amitabh Bachchan), Ravi (Shashi Kapoor) and Mangal (Shatrughan Singh) forcefully come together to fight for justice against me, i.e. Dhanraj.

Trishul

In this movie I am the soft and sinister businessman who shrewdly makes friends with his enemy's enemies, ever ready to change sides and settle scores.

I play Balwant Rai and have a common enemy with Vijay (Amitabh Bachchan) in Kumar Gupta (Sanjeev Kumar). Vijay is Gupta's illegitimate son. After his mother dies, Vijay comes to Delhi to take revenge by destroying his father's business and family connections. Shashi Kapoor and Poonam Dhillon play his half-siblings who are caught in the crossfire of Vijay's revenge.

Do Anjaane

This is the story of a deceitful friend who breaks up a happy marriage. I succeed in giving my friend's over-ambitious wife a taste of luxury and an inkling of the good things in store for her. I stealthily spur her into reviving her career.

A man (Amitabh Bachchan) is found wounded on a railway track and when he awakens he has no memory of his previous life. Soon he starts to regain his memory and remembers that his real name is Amit Roy and Ranjit (I play this role) was the one who attempted to kill him by throwing him off

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the train he was travelling on, with his wife Rekha. Amit now plans on taking revenge against Ranjit.

This film got me many prestigious awards. Notwithstanding the fact that the immensely popular Amitabh Bachachan was the hero, my performance was much appreciated.

Dostana

My role was of a godfather-like persona essayed with unexaggerated normalcy.

Vijay (Amitabh Bachchan), a police officer, and Ravi (Shatrughan Sinha), a lawyer, are best friends who do not question each other about their careers. While the former catches criminals, the latter bails them out and is employed by Daaga (Prem Chopra). Vijay and Ravi meet Sheetal (Zeenat Aman) at different places and times, and both fall in love with her. Daaga decides to weaken Vijay and Ravi's friendship. Vijay and Ravi become rivals for the first time.

I played Daaga and was pitched against two powerful performers, Amitabh Bachchan and Shatrughan Sinha. But I got my share of acting honours.

Kranti

I play Shambhu Singh, a character from youth to old age, set against a background of patriotism.

The film, set in 19th century British India, is about the fight for independence from the British. Sanga (Dilip Kumar) and Bharat (Manoj Kumar) known as Kranti, a prince (Shashi Kapoor) and a freedom fighter (Shatrughan Sinha), lead the war against British rule.

It is also the story of palace intrigue when Shambhu Singh (Prem Chopra) helps Shamsher Singh (Pradeep Kumar) kill his own brother so that he can occupy the throne. Together, they frame Sanga. Sentenced to death, he escapes and forms a group of revolutionaries who have only one motto —to drive the British out of India.

This film had a famous line of mine: '*Shambhu ka dimaag dodhari talwar hai.*'

Souten

I played the wicked uncle who is forever throwing a spanner in the works. The regulars came out mouthing my refrain '*Main who bala hoon jo shishe se patthar ko todta hoon*'.

Mard

I play an Anglo-Indian doctor who is double-crossing both the British and the freedom fighters. He is also the father of the heroine, Amrita Singh, an interesting characterization.

Phool Bane Angaarey

Dutta Babu (Parikshit Sahni) is standing for elections against a cunning, corrupt and established gangster, Bishamber Prasad (me), who is powerful and influential enough to swing the election his own way and have Dutta killed. Inspector Ranjit Singh (Rajnikanth) receives evidence about

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Bishamber's involvement in Dutta's death, but his superior officer prevents him from taking any action. Ranjit then meets the beautiful Namrata (Rekha), and they get married. As Ranjit continues to be a thorn in Bishamber's side, he is killed. Namrata pledges to avenge his death.

This film revolved around Rekha and me. Although Rajnikanth was there in the film, he dies before the interval. My role of a minister had many variations and went on to become very popular.

Agent Vinod

An action spy thriller! I play David Kazan, the Mexican connection who is accompanied by his personal doctor, Ruby Mendes (Kareena Kapoor). Kazan suspects Vinod (Saif Ali Khan), a RAW agent masquerading as Freddie Khambatta.

Some Positive Acts

Sikander E Azam

This was at the beginning of my career. I play Abhimanyu. I was the son of Prithviraj Kapoor and brother of Premnath in the film.

Kunwari

Since I was the leading man in this film, it will naturally remain very special to me.

Shaheed

Undoubtedly one of my favourite films! I play the role of Sukhdeo, the freedom fighter who sacrifices his life for the country. This film on patriotism was made with severe paucity of funds, but it remains one of the most honest and pure films. People who see this film cry unfailingly even today.

Jaadu Tona

I am the helpless father who faces the ordeal of a possessed daughter.

This film was based on the English film *The Exorcist* (1973). I had an absolutely positive role in the film where I play the father of the little girl who is possessed. I consider it one of my superlative roles.

Prem Pratiggya

Dasari Narayan Rao directed this film. Here I play a doctor who sacrifices a lot for his sister. It was a noble character.

Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year

Ranbir Kapoor has an idealistic vision of the working world which shatters quickly. I played P.S. Bedi, his grandfather.

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Many of my dialogues are still very popular. My famous dialogues were recognized as having a typical Prem Chopra flavour. Like the simple phrase of *Ghar Ek Mandir*—'*Byaj kaatke*' or *Bobby*—'*Prem naam hai mera*'. The strange thing is that these dialogues, though far from rhetorical, succeeded in becoming catchphrases for the masses. When I said, '*Main woh bala hoon jo sheeshe se patthar ko torta hoon*,' in *Souten*, people really believed me to be able to do just that. It was (as someone told me), 'the voice and style' that made them believe it.

Obviously there were side-effects to all this. A young man came to me and said, 'Sir, my face resembles you and I am called Junior Prem Chopra. Can I speak and act like you on stage?' I told him to go ahead. He knows my lines better than I do.

Famous Lines of Mine

Bobby: Prem naam hai mera…Prem Chopra

Beimaan: Main police commissioner ka eklauta beta, mein tumhe barbaad kar dunga

Souten: Main woh balaa hoon jo sheeshe se patthar ko todta hoon

Dulhe Raja: Nangaa nahaayega kya aur nichodega kya

Aaj Ka Arjun: Bhains poonch uthayegi to gaana to nahin gaayegi, gobar hi degi

Bewafa Se Wafa: Ajgar naam hai mera, mein khata nahi hoon, nigal jata hoon

Aaj ka Goonda Raj: Tum Mandakani se thodi zyada aur Madhuri se thodi kam ho

Aaj ka Goonda Raj: Main insaan se thoda zyaada hoon, bhagwaan se thoda kam

Kranti: Shambhu ka dimaag do-dhari talwar hai

Jawab: Tum toh jaante ho maine har janwar se kuch na kuch sikha hai; ulu se maine ek adat sikhi hai woh apna ghosla kaabhi nahin banata, balki doosre parindon ke ghoslon pe kabzaa kar leta hai. Yeh toh vahi misaal hui ram naam japna paraya maal apna.

Kshatriya: Meetha bol, bada anmol

Jamna baai ka kotha nahin, sangeet vidyalaya bolte hai

Betaab: Vagera, vagera

Hukumat: Thekedar Nanumal ko do hi cheezen aavey. Theka lena aur theka thokna

Santaan: Kameena kurki kutta harain nasty useless bloody dirty fellow

Phool Aur Angaar: Natwar naam hai mera, pyar se log mujhe NAUGHTY kehte hain

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There have been many occasions when fans have asked me to deliver these dialogues to entertain them.

I hold my audience in the highest esteem. I know I can never be larger than the masses. Their verdict is final. It is the people and spectators who can make or break a performer. I promise the best of healthy entertainment to my viewers. Whatever I am is due to their love and admiration.

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Salim Khan: In Conversation

We met for the first time on the sets of *Partner*. The heroine was Johnny Walker's wife Naaz. The film was never completed as Prem started doing negative roles. He was very busy with his career and made it much before me. I gave up acting in 1965 and went into writing.

Prem is a great friend with a terrific sense of humour; mind you, most people joke at the expense of others. But he is one of the few who laugh at themselves. He is sporting and easily allows himself to be the butt of jokes, joining in and even narrating it to people later. Indeed, a rare quality!

He could get along with everyone, right from Dilip Kumar to the junior-most artiste—a thorough professional and a very likeable man. He was particular about punctuality, and his commitment made him a producer's man to the hilt. It is one's total personality that is assessed before a production house repeats a star. And if he is not a thorough professional, he is sure to fail this test. Once Prem worked with somebody, he was always sure of being repeated by them. He has always given and commanded respect.

One outstanding quality was his ability to stand by himself; those days Premnath and Pran were big villains, but he never copied them. He created his own style. Normally, most would follow the Dilip Kumar style, he was the accepted reference point. When confused they would refer to his films. But Prem had his own concept of each role he played; how he planned to get under the skin of the character. He chose to follow his instinct, his own intepretation.

His career has been squeaky clean, unblemished by scandal or controversy. I don't think he even went to any association to fight for any remuneration that he may not have received. He preferred to just let it go. People constantly complain about what life or people have done to them. I have never heard Prem narrating an incident about someone who has cheated him or he has fallen out with. He has a philosophical attitude of forgive and forget. He is also a responsible husband and father. Respecting marriage and raising children well is also part of being a good man.

A distinct quality of Prem was his ability to stand aloof from the so called 'groups'. Today you have Salman's group, Shah Rukh's group, Aamir's group and each group is unwilling to work with the other. But he was amiable; he could work with anyone. Sometimes a less worthy person is favoured under the guise of, '*Apna aadmi hai, bula lo* (He's our man, call him)'. But it was never so with Prem; since the work he did was based on his own worth, any and every group sought him.

And the reason for this was that he never gossiped. He never carried talk from one set to the other. Plus, he was never choosy; he had no hang-ups about his co-stars. He worked with anyone who would work with him on respectable terms.

His capability as an actor was there for all to see. He conducted himself with respect and dignity. He was never too ambitious, always a happy man with what he got, what he was doing. He never aspired to become a producer; he had no desire to bite off more than he could chew and lose everything. He worked hard to make a mark and was very happy and content. As an actor, he has progressed a long way…and he is yet to hang up his boots. That is an admirable quality, especially since his interest is the same as it was when he started. To be an interesting actor you have to be interested in everything around you. Even now he is passionate about giving his best shot at what he does. He takes his job and profession seriously. From Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar, unke saath barabar se uthna baitna tha. Encyclopedia of adaptability as he has seen four to

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five generations of people coming and going. He has a huge experience.

His behaviour was always the same: pleasant even when we spent an evening with drinks. He never made a fool of himself. His conduct was always that of a gentleman. Even after a few drinks, he did not indulge in negativity or gossip. In fact, he would walk away from such talk.

I would like to conclude by saying that as people progress in their careers, they become more and more competent. But when their professional progress is not in tandem with their emancipation as better human beings, they have lost the battle of life.

Prophet Mohammed was asked, ' *Aapke jannat mein kaun jayenge* (Who will go to your heaven)?' He replied that while there were many ways to assess, the simplest was, '*Aadmi ke jannaze mein dus admi dil se keh deyn ke voh ek acchha admi tha, toh voh jannat mein jayenge* (If at a man's funeral ten men say he was a good man, he will go to heaven).'

Uske profession ki tareef se kahin zyaada uske insaniyat ki tareef honi chahiye (More than professionally, his humanity should be praised). It should not be yeh bahut bada actor thha par aadmi bekaar. He should be a good man.

Prem Chopra could achieve that.

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Epilogue

My sisters and I are what our parents made us. They taught us to always stand up for what is right. Another lesson was, 'If you are doing something which you are keeping from us, it means that it is not right.' We always kept that at the back of our mind; it was our conscience. Another piece of advice our parents gave us was to be clear-cut when it comes to money, as it could destroy relationships.

Interviewing Jeetendra was interesting—his first words to me were, 'I have to be careful what I tell you, you are the daughter.'

When I interviewed my brother-in-law Vikas, he said, 'What about the women—did you know…?'

Dad never brought all that home. A lot of liaisons took place before he was married, and we were not part of it. Over a period of time when I interviewed him and he spoke in detail about his films or various incidents of his life, no actress ever figured in his stories. He always spoke of the male bonding he shared with the heroes, the directors, the producers and his fight masters.

His focus was his work, and that is the indelible impression I carry of him since my childhood. If he ever spoke about a woman from the industry, it was with utmost respect. Taking names now in his story was not fair, simply because those women are mothers and grandmothers; they have made their own world and are in a happy space.

One part of his life were his films—my sisters and I saw all of them; and then there was his life as a father to us and a husband to my mother.

When I felt I was ready for him to read the book, he took two days before he called me. 'I read the first few pages, it is very interesting!' I smiled to myself as I thought, 'That was funny, considering he was reading his own life!'

—Rakita Nanda

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Awards & Accolades

- Filmfare Award for Best Supporting Actor for *Do Anjaane*
- Mother Teresa Award 2011 for humanitarian work and a five-decade-long career
- Lifetime Achievement Award from The Giants
- Indira Gandhi Priyadarshini Award
- Lions Club Award
- Ashoka Award
- Ashirwad Award
- Punjabi Kala Sangam Award
- Lifetime Achievement Award in Atlantic City
- Lifetime Achievement Award at Indian Film Festival of Norway 2011
- Lifetime Achievement Award at Indian Film Festival of Ireland 2011
- Lifetime Achievement from Punjabi Virsa Awards 2011
- Honoured at Berlin Film Festival 2012
- Lifetime Achievement Award in Lucknow (by Sahil Foundation)
- Living Legend Award at the Kalakar Awards, Kolkata, for Iconic Contribution to Indian Cinema
- Silver Jubilee Trophies marking the successful run of his films

Feathers in the Cap

- Represented India as Grand Marshall in Chicago during the Independence Day Parade on 15 August 1993
- Honoured by the Mayor of Chicago as ‘Honorary Citizen of Chicago’
- Felicitated by Federation Indian Association in Chicago with an award for outstanding contribution to humanitarian causes and enriching the Indian community in India and abroad

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Prem Awaargi

The poetry that became his guide—some his own, some borrowed and simplified.

1.
Pyaar se jeeto sabka dil,
Iska dil aur uska dil
Har dhadkan ki manzil kya hai
Sach poochon toh dil hi dil
Uparwaley daata ne sabko diya hai ek nanha sa pyaara sa dil
Hum insaanon ne usko naam de diya hai
Hindu ka dil, Musalman ka dil, Sikh ka dil, Isai ka dil
Arey thhes lagega toh tadpega yeh
Tera ho ya mera dil
Dil ki baatein dil hi jaane
Aakhir toh dil hai dil

2
Har rehguzar par shama jalana hai mera kaam
Tevar hain kya hawa ke, yeh main dekhta nahin

3
Zameen badle zama badle zamane ki hawa badley
Agar mein tujhse badloon toh mujhse mera khuda badley.

4
Ho bura waqt toh ud jaati hai gul se khushboo
Waqt accha ho toh patthar bhi mehak jaati hai
Aye gardishey waqt teri tohbaa tohbaa
Sajda karta hoon, kabaa bhi sarak jaata hai

5
Bujh jaye shama toh jal sakti hai
Kashti hade toofan se guzar sakti hai
Mayus na ho, iraade na badal
Taqdeer kisi waqt bhi badal sakti hai

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Aansoon-on ko aankhon ki dehleez par laya na karo
Apni dil ki haalat kisi ko bataya na karo
Log mutthi bhar namak liye ghoom rahein hai
Apne zakhm kisi ko dikhaya na karo

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I have referred to articles and press clippings of my dad in *Filmfare, Screen, The Times of India, Illustrated Weekly of India, Blitz, Cine Blitz, Stardust, Star & Style, Mayapuri, Movie Jagat, Cine Advance, Movie, The Indian Express, Film Information, Free Press Journal, Filmworld, Society, Mumbai Mirror, Mid-day, Cine Link, Sunday Calcutta, Film Mirror, Dreamstar, Onlooker.* Online, I have referred to Wikipedia, IMDB and YouTube.

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'We have shared some wonderful moments together
on outdoor locations; moments filled with fun and laughter,
of shared stories of old, of nights that stretched into mornings...'
—Amitabh Bachchan

'...the villain donned a new avatar in the guise of Prem Chopra.'
—Rishi Kapoor

'My personal belief is that no one tapped Prem's talent to the fullest.'
—Manoj Kumar

'...he walks into a room, adding positive energy.'
—Dharmendra

'...a rare and incredible actor who can effortlessly portray a plethora
of characters across the spectrum.'
—Hrithik Roshan

'...one of the most important pillars [of Hindi cinema].'
—Ranbir Kapoor

'...he is the sort of actor you cannot ignore. His dialogue delivery is superb.'
—David Dhawan

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